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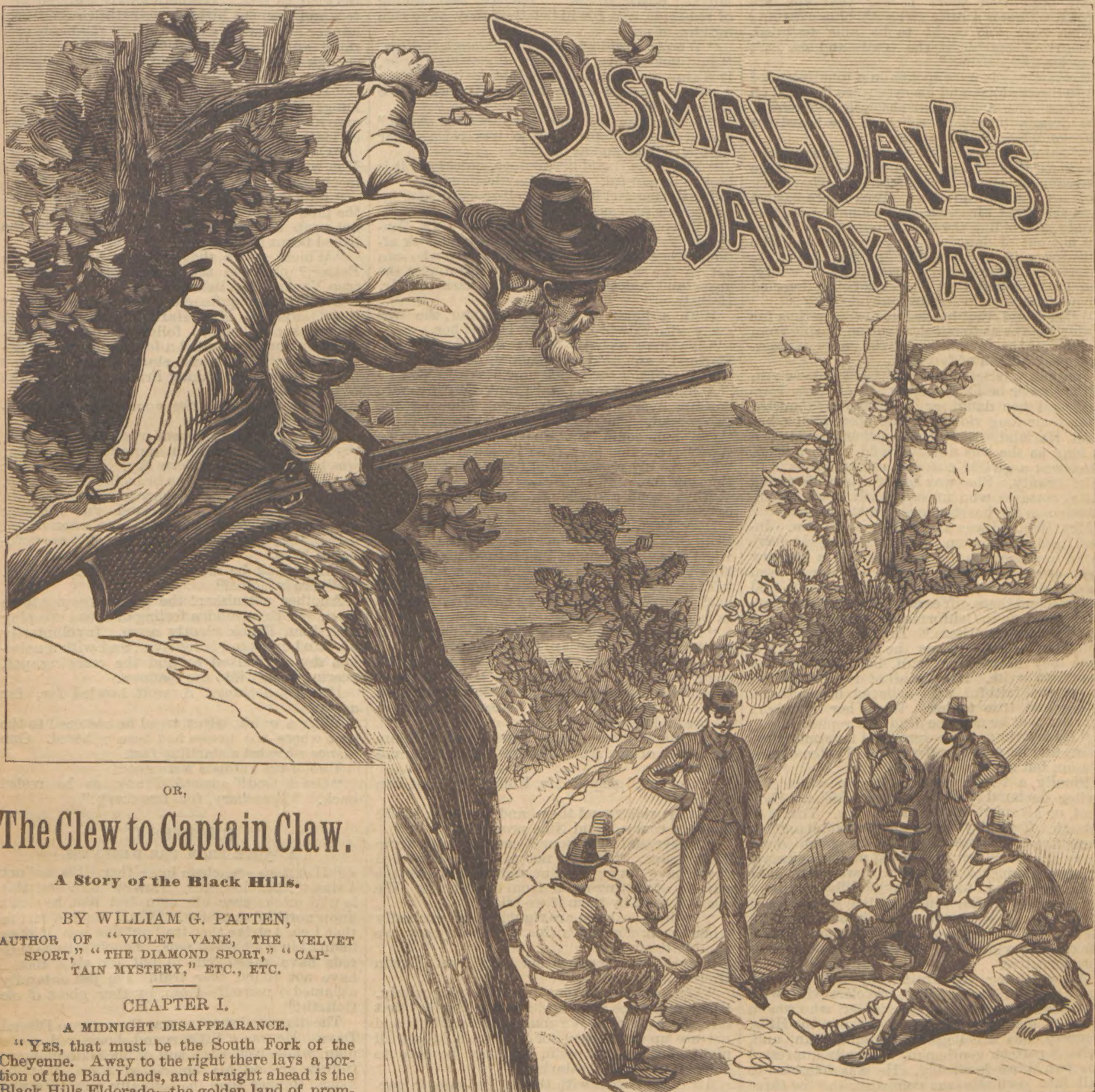
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OR, The Clew to Captain Claw.

A Story of the Black Hills.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE, THE VELVET
SPORT," "THE DIAMOND SPORT," "CAP-
TAIN MYSTERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT DISAPPEARANCE.

"YES, that must be the South Fork of the Cheyenne. Away to the right there lays a portion of the Bad Lands, and straight ahead is the Black Hills Eldorado—the golden land of promise. I feel like giving vent to a regular old-fashioned camp-meeting shout."

"SWORD O' OLE GOLIATH!" BREATHED OLD DAVE. "THAT'S HIM, MY DANDY PARD, SURE AS SHOOTIN'! I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT, NOHOW. WHAT'S HE THAR FER?"

The speaker—a prepossessing young man of about twenty-five—snatched off his wide-brimmed hat and struck his horse a cut with it that came near causing the tired animal to plunge into the stream at its feet. A burst of merry feminine laughter greeted this act and a pleasant, musical voice cried:

"Careful, Mr. Fenway, or you will be taking a bath. I'll wager the water is cold, and you know that you dislike anything cold."

"Especially the cold shoulder of a pretty girl," was the quick retort. "That always gives me the shivers."

"Or, in other words, a cold shake. Was that what you got away back East somewhere, Mr. Fenway, that sent you out into this wild land to seek for a fortune? Ah! I have it! She left you for the fellow with more money: you didn't break your heart but swore that some day you would be as rich as he! That is why you are going to the newly discovered gold fields of the Black Hills. Have I the truth? Confess."

"You are a charming little witch, Miss Harland; but if you cannot read the future better than you can tell what has happened in the past, I shall put little confidence in your ability as a fortune-teller. You do me credit in thinking that I would not break my heart over a pretty face; but, even there I fear that you are wrong. I know a little girl with blue eyes and golden hair who ought to be able to break a heart of marble if she tried—and she isn't very far away either."

His last words were spoken in a tone intended for her ears alone, and his eyes were fastened on her face with a look that she well understood. She drew a breath of relief as she heard the voice of Edwin Hollis saying:

"I think you are right, Fenway; this must be the South Fork of the Cheyenne. It is too large a stream for one of its tributaries. The Black Hills lay right ahead of us. Providence has led us in the right direction, and we have been fortunate in avoiding the bloodthirsty reds; but we are not out of danger yet by any means. The Hills are said to be full of Indians and white outlaws. Custer is the nearest point of safety, and I have heard that Custer is being deserted for new diggings in Deadwood Gulch."

"The Hand that has led us in safety thus far is able to take us to our destination," came from the lips of the fourth one of the party, a pleasant-faced woman of forty.

The sun was setting when the four drew rein in the timber beside the river. Both Mrs. Harland and her daughter were nearly exhausted after their long ride over the open plains, but Nina Harland was one who never complained as long as she was able to hold up her head. Nina was a girl of courage and spirit as well as of beauty. She was one of those charming little creatures who unconsciously made an impression on the heart of every man she met.

Mrs. Harland was a courageous woman. Indeed, only a woman of courage would have dared penetrate to the very heart of a country then swarming with hostile red-skins, even though she was searching for and hoped to find her husband there. Years before, Richard Harland had gone to California, to make his fortune in the "Golden State." He left his wife and daughter behind. It was the old story. For a time they heard from him, but, suddenly, he ceased to write. But for all of the years of silence, the faithful wife believed her husband living and true to her. When her neighbors told her that he must be dead, she replied:

"He is living. If he were dead he would come to me and let me know the truth. I often dream of him, but never as one dead."

Finally a letter came to her in which the writer declared that he had seen Richard Harland, or his spirit, in the Black Hills. That was enough. Two days later mother and daughter were flying westward as fast as steam would carry them. When they could no longer travel in that manner, they joined a wagon-train of emigrants bound for the Black Hills by way of the Niobrara Valley route, piloted by the noted old ranger Dave Dunston, but known through all the Black Hills region as "Dismal Dave," for reasons which will appear in the course of this narrative.

After joining the train they met and became acquainted—as fellow-travelers will—with Frank Fenway, a young Easterner who was in hopes of making a fortunate strike in the Hills. Fenway was a college-bred young man, and, being a perfect gentleman, naturally impressed the two ladies favorably. He was delighted to fall into such pleasant company, and the three were much together.

Edwin Hollis—a man of forty-five—joined the train after it had been out several days. He

was a quiet, agreeable-appearing man, and soon succeeded in becoming acquainted with the trio from the East. His presence seemed to make the little party more complete, so he was made welcome. He had very little to say about himself, and of course was not questioned when the others saw that he was reticent on that topic.

Everything was lovely, and the emigrants had a delightful journey till they were far up the Niobrara. When they left the river and shaped their course in a northwesterly direction the old guide said:

"Now look er leetle out fer snags. If we don't see smoky-skins or sum sign o' 'em afore shortly, w'y sum o' ye cum roun' an' let me know thet I'm an idiot frum Crazy Crick. I kin smell trouble in ther air. We're ap' ter run erg'in' er reg'ler double-an'-twisted ole disaster, so keep yer han's out o' yer pockets an' yer guns redly fer shootin'."

Old Dave spoke the truth. It was not long before he discovered "sign" and informed the party that reds were near. But there were some in the party who seemed to pay little heed to the old man's words. They would have to see Indians and know that they were in danger before they would believe it.

"The old fellow is trying to frighten us," laughed Edwin Hollis. "We have seen nothing of red-skins, and I will bet that they have seen nothing of us."

"Who is afraid of an Indian?" laughed Nina. "I do not believe there are any around. See, it is almost sunset, the time that we have taken a gallop together every night. Are we to lose it to-night?"

"Better lose the ride than lose our scalps," smiled Frank Fenway, who was riding near with Mrs. Harland at his side.

"Yes, Nina," said her mother, quickly, "it is best to be careful. There may be danger."

The daring girl flashed a half-scornful look into Frank's face as she cried:

"You are too brave for anything, Mr. Fenway! Never mind: you may stay and look after mother while Mr. Hollis and I see who can get to the sun before it creeps down into the grass and hides for the night. Come on, Mr. Hollis!"

With a burst of musical laughter, she was away with Edwin Hollis just behind her.

"We may as well follow them," said Mrs. Harland, an anxious shadow on her face. "Nina will not turn back now."

A moment later she and Frank Fenway were dashing over the rolling plain, following the two ahead. They heard Old Dismal call to them, but could not understand his words. Away went the four directly toward the spot where the big round ball of fire seemed to touch the horizon. Nina turned and saw them. With a shout and a laugh she defied them to catch her.

How long the wild dash continued none of them could tell, but the sun had disappeared when they drew rein and permitted the panting horses a respite. For several minutes they were talking together before Frank turned to look back toward the train. A cry burst from his lips as he did so.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, catching Hollis by the arm. "What are those figures?"

Far away through the hazy shadows which were settling over the plain could be seen several dark forms which were moving between them and the train. Hollis gazed a minute in silence and then said slowly:

"I believe those are Indians—in fact, I am quite sure of it. And they are between us and the train."

"Heavens!" gasped Mr. Hollis. "What can we do?"

"Why, ride round them and get back to the train, of course," said Nina promptly.

"Easier said than done," came grimly from Hollis's lips. "If I am not mistaken, those red devils have got between us and the train for the purpose of cutting us off from our friends. We could not get by them if we tried."

"By heavens! you are right!" came excitedly from Frank Fenway's lips. "Look! they are coming this way!"

A look of determination settled on Edwin Hollis's face.

"We must run for our lives," he said, calmly. "Our only hope of escape rests in the fact that it is so near dark. We must have caution and not use up our horses, for if they hold out till night shrouds the plain, we may be able to dodge the reds in the darkness."

Away they went with the red Bedonins in pursuit. It was fortunate, indeed, that night was so near at hand, for although the Indians pressed their horses hard, they were unable to

overtake the fleeing pale-faces before darkness settled over the prairie. Led by Hollis, the fugitives succeeded in avoiding their pursuers. A part of the night was spent in a little piece of timber near a cool spring. When morning came nothing could be seen of either the reds or the wagon-train.

"But if you will trust yourselves to me, I think that I can lead you back to the train," was Hollis's assertion.

But that day and several others passed without their seeing anything of the train. The two men succeeded in killing enough game with their revolvers to keep the little party from hunger, and they pushed on to the northwest, hoping to reach the Hills if they did not find the train. They forded the White River, came in sight of the Hills, and finally, just at sunset, reached the South Fork of the Cheyenne.

"I believe this will be an excellent place to spend the night, eh, Fenway?" and Hollis glanced around.

"As good as any we are liable to find," replied the one addressed. "We are all tired and the horses are nearly fagged. Here is plenty of water and we have enough to eat to-night. Yes, I favor stopping."

The ladies were consulted and they were only too glad to rest. The horses were watered and fed, and then the little party satisfied their own hunger and thirst, eating the last remnants of a small antelope which Hollis had been lucky enough to bring down at a wonderful long distance.

"We must have more food to-morrow or go hungry," smiled Frank. "As for me, I would give all that I am worth for a good old-fashioned plate of baked beans."

"Oh-o!" gasped Nina. "Don't speak of it! You will set me wild! I am sick of the sight of meat, meat, meat!"

"As for me," added Hollis, as he pulled at the pipe which he had just lighted, "I would not swap a slice of army hard-tack for all the baked beans in the country."

"Which shows that you are not a Down-Easter," observed the young man. "Every true Yankee likes baked beans."

Until it was quite dark they talked in low tones. Finally, Mrs. Harland fell asleep and Nina was not long in following her example. The two men consulted a few moments and decided that Hollis should stand guard the first part of the night, waking Frank near midnight to take his place.

Five minutes later the young man was sleeping soundly.

The night was far spent when Frank awoke, the moon, which had been quite tardy in rising, was hanging in the eastern sky. Its white light crept down through the branches of the trees, enabling the young Easterner to see around him close at hand. Mrs. Harland was reposing placidly just where she had been when he fell asleep, but, to his amazement, he could see nothing of Nina.

"She must be close at hand," he thought. "Where is Hollis?"

Another astonisher! the guard was not to be seen. With a sudden feeling of dread creeping over him, Frank silently arose. Involuntarily his hand crept to his revolver, and with a noiseless step he walked around the camping spot, peering keenly into the shadows.

He saw nothing. A wolf howled far, far away.

With a quick, silent tread he hastened to the spot where the horses had been tethered. One glance revealed a startling fact.

Two of the animals were gone!

"Great God!" gasped Frank, as he reeled back. "Treachery, foul treachery!"

CHAPTER II.

A VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS.

"HYER we are, clean inter ther Hills, an' not a sign o' ther lost 'uns. Howlin' tomcats! this is w'at mecks ther ole man feel like he don't know northin' skeersely. W'y, I was jest sart'in that I c'u'd strike ther trail an' fine 'em if they hadn't bin gobbled by reds. I don't beleieve ther reds have raked 'em in, but, fer all o' thet, I have not found ther trail. I'm jest naterally ashamed o' merself—I am, by ther ghost o' ole Goliath!"

The disgusted speaker was the veteran Dismal Dave. He was a little round-shouldered, spare man, whose well worn suit of buckskin clung so tightly around his emaciated form, that he looked thinner than he actually was. He was nearly sixty years of age, but nevertheless old Dave Dunston was as spry and smart as a young man of twenty-five. He looked like a

person with one foot in the grave, but the red-skin or white ruffian who jumped on the old fellow with the idea that he would be easily disposed of, usually met with a genuine surprise, and came out of the battle in a demoralized condition. Old Dismal was a perfect terror in a fight of any kind.

His weapons were not of the latest and most improved pattern; indeed, they were rather ancient in appearance; but, for all of that, those who were best acquainted with the veteran, knew that he could handle them with wonderful effectiveness. He was a dead shot with either rifle or revolver.

Old Dave's face would have been an interesting study for a physiognomist. The merry twinkle of his blue eyes was given the lie by the lugubrious expression of his mouth, making it difficult for one to tell whether he was on the point of bursting into a flood of tears or a roar of laughter. The old ranger was greatly given to "yarning," and many were the wonderful adventures—dismal disasters he called them—which he related, and in each and every one he had played a prominent part. But, it was a singular fact that he seldom repeated a story, and if he did repeat one, it bore little resemblance to the original yarn. His friends sometimes hinted that his imagination was responsible for many of the startling adventures which he related.

The old guide had left the train in charge of a man who was fully able to take it through to its destination, and started to search for the little party of four who had been separated from the emigrants by the red-skins who had cut them off from the train. He did not believe that the unfortunate party had fallen into the hands of the red scavengers, for his keen eyes had shown him that the Indians could not overtake their intended prey before darkness would shroud the plain. He hoped that the whites had escaped in the night.

When Old Dave made known his intention of going in search for the lost ones he was surprised to see a foppishly-dressed youth of twenty ride up to his side and request the privilege of accompanying him. He had noticed the young fellow with the train, but had paid little attention to him, for if there was anything that the old ranger detested it was a fop. A "biled" shirt filled Old Dismal with disgust, and the youth not only wore such a shirt but he sported a pair of gold-rimmed nose-glasses. He was dressed in a finely-fitting suit and was scrupulously clean from head to foot. The knot in his necktie was arranged as carefully as it would have been had he thought of making his appearance in the finest parlor in the land. Not a weapon was visible anywhere on his person. The young man's figure was small for one of his age and his face was strangely handsome—almost effeminate.

Dunston slowly surveyed the dandified youth from head to foot, a look of amusement and contempt settling on his queer face.

"Want ter go with me, do ye? Waal, waal, waal! W'at are we cumin' to! Say, yonker, have ye got an insurance on them air kurls o' yourn? Them'd look awful poorty hangin' in ther wigwam o' sum red buck. They'd meck an ellygant ornymint. No, my dear boy, I don't think you'd better go with ther ole man, fer I'm ap' ter stub ont'er er reg'ler ragin' disaster away out yan, an' you'd be shore ter git chawed up fu'st pop. Jest you go tell yer mammy thet she'd better look er leetle out fer you or ye may git hurt."

The young dandy's face flushed through the coat of tan which it had acquired since he joined the train, but, he said not a word as he turned away with the laughter of several of the emigrants ringing in his ears.

That night as Old Dismal went into camp in a grove of cottonwoods miles away from the train he was amazed to see the young man ride up and dismount. When he saw who his visitor was, the guide lowered the long-barreled rifle, giving vent to a snort of disgust.

"Power o' ole Goliath!" he grunted. "Whar did you cum from?"

"From the train," was the quiet reply, as the youth faced the guide, dropping both hands into his side coat-pockets.

"An' whar are ye goin'?"

"I am going with you to help you find our friends who were separated from the train."

For several moments the old ranger of the mountains and plains could only gasp in an ineffectual attempt to utter a word. Finally he mumbled:

"Goin' to help me find them folkses are ye? Waal, I'll be dam-aged!"

"That's a fact," came coolly from the young

dandy's lips; "you are sure to be damaged if you kick against my going with you."

That was more than Old Dave could stand. With a burst of rage, he essayed to lift his long rifle again, but a cool, firm voice checked him.

"Go just a trifle slow, old man," came calmly from the young dandy's lips. "You will observe that I hold the drop."

To the borderman's amazement he saw the youth's hands flash out of his pockets, each one holding a gleaming revolver. Then *click-click*—Old Dave was covered.

For several moments the two gazed at each other in grim silence; then Dunston asked:

"Say, whar in ther name o' Solomon Short-auger did you git them pops, yonker?"

The dandy laughed softly, as he replied:

"Those toys were given me by my mother when I was a baby. She let me have these instead of giving me a top and rattle."

"Be they loaded?"

"Yes, with 32-long."

"Kin you shoot 'em?"

"She taught me to lay in the cradle and shoot flies on the walls to save her the expense of purchasing fly-traps."

Old Dismal gasped and appeared about to faint. There was a moment of silence, then both he and the youth burst into laughter.

"You're a dandy!" the old man declared.

"Don't you think you need my aid in finding those lost ones?" asked the young fellow.

"Dunno but I do," admitted the guide.

"W'at's yer name?"

"Dandy is good enough for me."

"All right, Dandy, I cave; you can come along. But mind, ef we run erg'in'er reg'ler dismal disaster an' you lose them air kurls, I don't want ye ter lay it up erg'in' ther old man w'en ye git ter heaven."

And so it was settled.

Clean through to the Hills went Old Dave and Dandy, but without finding a trace of those for whom they were searching. It was in the early dusk of evening when they halted and the ranger gave vent to the words with which this chapter opens.

"It is singular that we have found nothing of them," Dandy confessed. "Of course it is possible that they have fallen into the hands of the reds."

"To be course, but, sumhow, I don't jest believe it. Both Hollis an' thet Fenway war pritty sharp fellers, an' I reckon as how either o' 'em'd fight till ther las' gasp fer ther females."

"Perhaps so, but I must confess that I did not like the appearance of Hollis, as he calls himself."

"W'at's ther matter with him?"

"I cannot quite tell, but for some reason he did not impress me favorably. I suspect him of not being what he represents himself to be."

"Reckon thet must be only a fancy."

"Perhaps so, but I would give all that I am worth to know that Miss Harland is safe."

Old Dave turned and looked Dandy full in the face.

"Look hyer," he said, slowly, "I smell ther rat. Reckon I saw ye with thet leetle piece o' feminine loveliness oncet or twicet. Boy, ye're head an' heels in love with her. Thet explains w'y you war so sot on comin' with me."

And the blush which crimsoned Dandy's cheeks told that the old borderman had hit the truth.

"Don't blame ye er leetle bit, lad, but I reckon you hev er poorty dangerous rival in thet air Fenway. I tell ye, boy, it takes er man with sand and vim to win ther love o' er poorty leetle creeter like Miss Nina."

"And do you think," flashed Dandy, "that because I am small I am any less a man? Do you think me lacking in sand? By heavens! you shall find out your mistake some day!"

"There, there, there!" said the old ranger, trying to quiet the excited youth. "Don't get so flurried! I didn't mean nothin'. Cum, let's be movin', fer we must fine er place ter stop fer ther night, fer stop we've got ter."

It was nearly an hour later when they prepared to pass the night in a narrow valley through which ran a small creek. Each night had they taken turns at watching and sleeping, and to-night it was decided that Dandy should act as guard the first part of the night. When their horses had been attended to and their own hunger pacified, Old Dave smoked a few minutes and then rolled himself in his blanket.

It was near the hour of midnight when the old guide was aroused by feeling a light touch on his shoulder. In an instant he was wide awake, with every sense on the alert. Then he heard Dandy whisper:

"Dunston, are you awake?"

"Bet yer socks!" was the reply. "W'at's ther deefkilty?"

"I think there is some one around the camp. Twice have I seen a shadowy form."

Old Dave sat up, grasping his long rifle.

"Show it ter me an' see suthin' drap."

For several minutes neither of them saw anything unusual. Suddenly Dandy grasped Dave's arm, exclaiming in a sharp whisper:

"Look! there it is again!"

Plainly the old borderman saw a shadowy form not far away. Instantly the guide cried:

"Halt! Who is thet?"

The answer was a burst of wild laughter that was startling, to say the least. Then the shadowy form vanished.

"Horn o' Gabriel!" gasped Dunston. "Whar's it gone?"

Out of the darkness came a strange voice saying:

"I know you both—I know your mission. Those whom you seek are in danger, for there is a traitor in their midst. But I know that traitor—ha! ha! I know him! His days are numbered! Death is lurking close at his heels!"

Neither Old Dismal or Dandy could tell from whence the voice came. The Hills ranger demanded:

"Who in ther name o' ther prophets be you, anyhow?"

"I am a shadow of the darkness," was the reply. "Ha! ha! I am Shadow—Shadow, the Man from Sundown! You cannot see me, for I am like a breath of air. I can make myself invisible when I choose; and, when I wish, I can assume the form of a human being. I am a man who has died—I am a disembodied spirit! They hung a man by the neck until he was dead! The sun was setting. They rode away, leaving a dead man behind. And at sundown the spirit of the dead man left the lifeless body and started on the trail of vengeance. I am that spirit—ha! ha! I am the spirit of the man who was hanged at sundown!"

"The man is mad!" said Dandy, softly.

"Or tryin' ter work sum kind o' er measly racket ont'er us," came from the old ranger.

Again the voice came out of the gloom:

"If you wish to find those for whom you are seeking, go exactly south fifteen miles. At sunset they camped there; at sunrise they will move on again. I have seen them—two women with faces white and trusting hearts; two men—one true as steel, the other with a heart as black as Stygian darkness. I know them both—I know them both! Ha! ha!"

"Hoppin' tomcats!" muttered Old Dave. "I'm gittin' interested."

"Move—move at once if you would find them," continued the voice. "But beware! the Hills are full of red-men, and white vultures are abroad in the darkness. You may find foes on every hand. But more to be dreaded than the red-men are the white fiends who call themselves Vultures. Look out for them. I am going now. I am going—ha! ha!—I am going!"

The strange creature laughed wildly, and the sound grew fainter and fainter, and seemed to recede further and further till it appeared to die out away down the little valley.

CHAPTER III.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE.—A CRY OF DISTRESS.

FOR several moments Old Dave Dunston and Dandy were silent. The veteran was the first to speak:

"Sorrer o' Sodom! I'll be eternally dam-swizzled if this don't git me! I c'u'dn't jest locate ther blamed critter, fer ther voice seemed ter cum from hafe er dozen places. This breaks me up bad ez rassilin' with er spook—it jest duz!"

"I believe the man is an escaped lunatic," declared Dandy. "That laugh was the laugh of a madman."

"Dunno but ye're right, lad; but I must confess thet it seemed ter me like su'thin' sooper-natt'al. Did ye mine ther way thet thar laugh went slidin' away down ther valley till it got so fur away thet we c'u'dn't hear it?"

"Yes, but that seemed to me like a trick of ventriloquism."

"Who's he?"

"Who's who?"

"Vent Trillerquism. If he's as funny as his name, he must be er comical cuss."

Dandy laughed and explained his meaning.

"Young man," said the old ranger, solemnly, "I'm pritty ole—fact is, I'm 'bout ole ernuff ter die. I've bin kickin' roun' this hyer yarh inter ther neighborhood o' sixty y'ars. I've bin through dismal disasters thet w'ud'a putt 'most enny other man under ther daisies, an' I've seen

an' heerd 'most everythin' thar is ter be seen an' heerd, but I never heerd o' er natteral born human critter throwin' his voice roun' ennywhar he wanted ter, like he c'u'd throw a dead cat if he had her by ther tail."

And the youth found it a difficult thing to convince the old guide that ventriloquism was a possibility. Finally Old Dave arose, saying:

"Boyee, I'm goin' ter travel south fifteen miles."

Dandy was surprised.

"Do you put any confidence in the wild talk of that unseen person?" he asked.

"Waal," drawled the mountain ranger, "mebby I do, then erg'in mebby I don't. He may hev tole ther truth, all ther same."

"And you hope to find those for whom we are searching?"

"Pr'aps. Ef we go south fifteen miles, we won't be fur from ther South Fork o' ther Cheyenne. Ther ones we're lookin' fer may hev camped thar fer ther night."

"You are right," Dandy confessed, eager to move as soon as he thought there was a possibility of finding the little party of lost ones. "That Shadow, as he calls himself, may have tole ther truth. Let's make haste."

"Now don't fly off ther handle," drawled the clear-headed old man. "We hain't a tall sartin' in ther critter spoke ther truth. It may hev bin er trick ter lead us inter sum kind o' er trap, so it's best ter go er leetle slow. Reckon he didn't lie w'en he sed thet thar is plenty o' ther red varmints in ther Hills, an' he may have tole ther truth w'en he sed thet ther White Vultures are rantin' roun'."

"The White Vultures?"

"Yes. Hain't you ever heerd o' them?"

The young man confessed that he had not.

"Waal, they're a ban' o' measly, pestiferous, piratical outlaws—er gang o' robbers as has lately cum inter ther Hills. They call themselves ther Callyforny Vultures, an' say they cum frum Callyforny. They are ez bad, if not wuss, as ther dirty smoky-skins, an' they're wuss ter ketch nor fleas. Ther chief seems ter be er young feller sheersly more than er boy, an' his sister—er bootiful black-eyed gal—is queen o' ther band."

"Rather romantic,"

"Waal, yes, pr'aps so; but I don't keer fer enny in mine."

"Have you ever seen this brigand queen?"

"Horn o' Gabriel, no!"

"Do you know of any one who has?"

"Waal, I've heerd hafe-er-dozen say as how they had, but I knew thet sum o' them lied. I've heerd lots say thet they'd seen Captain Claw, ther chief o' ther ban'; but sum sed he was er man full growed and sum sed he was er boy. Everybuddy seems all mixed up erbout him. Ter tell ther truth, everybuddy's mixed 'bout ther Vultures, ennyhow. It almost seems like there was two ban's o' them an' two chiefs."

Old Dave had been busy while he talked, and he was now prepared to move. Five minutes later the two were riding down the little valley.

"We're goin' ter hev er moon purty soon," the old guide observed. "Thet'll be er good thing fer us."

Dandy was silent, apparently thinking deeply. Dunston watched him closely, although the darkness prevented him from studying the expression on the young man's face. Dandy was an enigma which the old ranger could not understand. While he felt that the youth's soft voice and dandified ways were deserving of the greatest contempt, there was something about the young fellow which commanded the veteran's respect despite himself.

As they progressed the valley grew a little wider. The darkness was made less dense by a faint white light which came from the rising moon that would soon appear above the eastern hills. But there were black shadows lurking amid the rocks and bushes.

"Er jolly place fer er red-skin ambush," thought Old Dismal, as he gazed keenly into the gloom. Gods o' war!"

From far away came the sound of several shots fired in rapid succession.

"Trouble ahead!" exclaimed Dandy.

"Waal, I sh'u'd serclaim! Thar's sum kind o' a diffikilty bruck loose thar an' no mistook. Hark."

They both drew rein and listened, but only the soft whisper of the night wind as it swept through the valley could be heard.

"Reckon it's over 'bout ez soon's it begun," grunted the veteran. "We'll forge ahead kinder cautious like, fer if we hain't keerful we may run plum' erg'in' er full-grown disaster. Cum on."

Slowly they rode forward with their hands on their weapons. It was well for them that they were cautious, for suddenly nearly a score of dark figures sprung out from both sides of the valley. Then a chorus of wild, triumphant yells—the war-cry of the Sioux—rent the darkness. An answering yell came from the throat of Old Dismal.

"Whoop!" he bellowed. "Ther red whelps o' perdition are upon us! Ther smoky-skinned varmints are reachin' fer our top-knots! Look out fer them kurls, Dandy! Now's ther time ter 'lustrate w'at ye're made of! Pile inter 'em! let yerself loose! Wake, cyclones, blizzards an' yartbquakes! Yi, yi, yihooyah! This is w'at I call er picnic. Walk up, red-skins, an' let me interjuce ye ter er reg'ler ole-fashioned, double-an'-twisted, iron-riveted, all-wool-an'-a-yard-wide dismal disaster! Come an' git yer medicine!"

With a revolver in each hand, the old Indian-fighter rained lead to the right and left. Round and round on its hind feet wheeled the well-trained horse which the border tramp bestrode, and the spouts of flame from his revolvers literally made a circle of fire. Forward leaped the Indians, determined to capture alive the man whom they at once recognized as their old and hated enemy; but each one that essayed to grasp the rein which lay loose upon the horse's neck reeled back from the muzzles of those dreaded revolvers. Man and horse seemed like a perfect cyclone of destruction. Old Dave Dunston was on the rampage!

But, what was Dandy doing?

When they were attacked two reds had sprung to the head of the magnificent black horse which the young man bestrode. But, barely had one of them grasped the animal by the bit when there was a flash of steel and the sharp blade of a knife cut across the back of the red hand. With a yell, the warrior released his hold, but the other instantly filled his place. Only for a moment, for this time the knife was aimed for a more vital spot; the Indian staggered back to fall to the ground, his days of warfare ended. Not a shot had the young man fired; he was reserving his revolvers for a more desperate emergency.

Suddenly he heard Old Dismal crying:

"Break loose, lad; git out o' this, Dandy, if ye kin. Don't mind me; I'll foller. Jeewhiz! what a time this is! Stan' off, ye whelps o' darkness! Don't crowd ther ole man if ye want ter keep erway frum ther happy huntin'-groun's. Howlin' tomcats! What a time! This air fun!—raal Ole Dismal fun!"

Dandy did not hesitate to make a break for liberty, and, much to his surprise, he easily got clear of the mass of yelling reds. Then he reined round his horse and looked back to see if Old Dismal was following. An exclamation of dismay came from his lips as he did so.

The old ranger's revolvers had failed him and the Indians were crowding around him on every hand, trying to drag him from the horse. Had not the animal been a sagacious creature they would have succeeded. As it was, the horse was wheeling round and round, kicking, pawing and screaming as if possessed by devils. But the red-skins would not be held at bay a great while in that manner.

Old Dave was in a desperate situation.

Dandy's keen eyes saw how the case stood. The darkness could not conceal the guide's peril from him. Out came his silver-mounted revolvers, and, with a shrill, ear-splitting yell, he charged back to the rescue. The rapidity with which Dandy worked his revolvers was simply amazing. With the bridle-rein in his teeth and both hands spouting fire, he plunged into the very midst of the yelling pack of Sioux. Right and left scattered the red-skins, and, in a few seconds, the little dandy was at Old Dave's side.

"This way, old man!" yelled the daring youth. "It's get clear now or never."

"Kirect. I'm with ye. Cl'ar ther way, smoky-skins, fer hyer we cum! Ole Dismal an' his Dandy Pard!"

The Indians, who had expected to take them by surprise, were demoralized. The two whites seemed more like fiends than human beings. The reds made one last desperate but unsuccessful attempt to capture their hoped-for victims, and had the satisfaction of seeing both Old Dismal and Dandy break away and plunge into the darkness, sending back taunting yells of triumph.

Half an hour later the old man and the youth drew rein, far from the scene of battle.

"Dandy, boy," came from the old border-man's lips, "let me grip yer han'. You're ther best little man on ther git up an' fight thet I ever did see. W'y, lad, you're wuss nor con-

densed chain-lightnin'! An' talk erbout sand! You've got it! I reckon if 'tadn't bin fer you ther ole man's skulp 'u'd ornyminted er Soo wig-wam. I'm proud o' you, boy, an' frum this time we're pards. I'm reddy ter stan' by you through thick an' thin."

The moon, just peeping over the eastern hills, saw the man and youth clasp hands.

"You give me too much credit, Dunston," said Dandy, modestly. "I only did what any man would have done under similar circumstances."

"Thar, thar, don't talk like thet! Not one man in five hundred c'u'd 'a' fit like thet if they'd wanted ter, an' less nor thet w'u'd cum back arter they'd bruck clear like you had. You risked your life an' them kurls fer ther ole man an' w'en he fergits it he'll be toes up ter ther daisies. Amen!"

"Hark!" cried Dandy, suddenly. "What was that? Listen!"

Both listened, but for a time heard nothing.

"It must have been the howl of some wild animal," the youth decided; "but, it sounded remarkably like the cry of a woman in distress. There! There it is again!"

Now both heard it plainly—a cry of distress and a feminine voice!

"By heavens, man! that was Nina Harland's voice!"

"Sure's yer sayin', boy. That were the gal!"

CHAPTER IV.

WORK OF THE WHITE VULTURES.

In a quiet way, Frank Fenway and Dandy were rivals for Nina Harland's attentions. Despite his foppish ways, Dandy was a modest, almost bashful-appearing person in the presence of ladies. For that reason, he had not become so well acquainted with Nina as Frank had; indeed, he would not have become acquainted at all had not Nina made it plainly evident that she wished to know him. Fellow-travelers seldom stand for ceremony, therefore the two soon found a good excuse for speaking with each other, regardless of the fact that there had been no introduction.

After that the two were together quite often, and it was really difficult to tell which Nina preferred, Dandy or Frank. As Nina was the only young lady with the train and both of the young men enjoyed her company, it was but natural that they should become a bit jealous of each other. When it was a requisite of politeness, they spoke to each other, but it was in a very cold and formal manner. Nina soon saw how things stood, and, filled with a roguish desire for "fun," she played hot and cold with each of them by turns. It was impossible for either of the young men to understand the strange coquettish little creature.

"What is that young man's name, Miss Harland?" questioned Frank, one day after Nina had been talking with Dandy.

"What young man are you speaking of?" asked the girl, a twinkle in the depths of her merry blue eyes.

"That foppish youngster who sports the gold-rimmed nose-glasses. I have never been able to learn his proper name; but you seem quite familiar with him, and therefore you must know it quite well."

"Pardon me, Mr. Fenway," icily, "I am not at all familiar with the gentleman to whom you refer. As fellow-travelers, we are acquainted while the journey lasts. I have other acquaintances on similar terms."

Frank flushed and then turned pale.

"Which means that you will not know us when the journey is ended?"

In an instant her manner changed.

"Does it?" she laughed. "Who would have thought you so remarkably acute!"

He looked puzzled, for he could not understand those sudden changes. He had been on friendly terms with scores of girls, but this one was the greatest enigma that he had ever known.

"Yes," he said, slowly, "I presume that is what you meant."

"But, you mustn't presume, you know. There is nothing so annoying as a presuming person."

"Then I am to consider myself annoying to you?"

"Did I say so? No, indeed! I simply said that you must not presume."

"Would you consider it presumptuous if I ask the name of the young man we were speaking of?"

"Oh, not at all! I do not know how the young man will look at it, though."

"What do you mean?"

"That if you learn his name you will have to ask him."

"You do not know it?"

"No."

"And yet you are on such friendly terms with him! Has he never offered to tell you his name?"

"Never offered! Why, he declined! Said that for the time he is nameless, and so I call him Mr. Nameless."

Frank looked surprised.

"That is strange. What object can the fellow have in concealing his name? It looks a little suspicious. Miss Harland, I should not think you would desire the acquaintance of a person who seeks to hide his identity."

"Now, there is where you make a mistake, Mr. Fenway," laughed the girl. "You know that I delight in anything romantic, and a man without a name seems so romantic. Ha! ha! ha!"

And when her opportunity came, she teased Dandy in a similar manner. Thus she kept the two in hot water and enjoyed herself greatly. And both of them were right when they declared to themselves that she was the most charming, annoying, delightful and aggravating little witch they had ever met.

During the time that the little party of four had been separated from the train Nina had tortured and charmed Frank in a manner that many young ladies would have pronounced "perfectly scandalous." More than ever was he inclined to believe her a most puzzling enigma.

But, what had become of the girl, Edwin Hollis and the two horses? We have seen how Frank discovered that they were gone, but the reader is yet unaware of the cause of the midnight disappearance.

Nina was very tired when she fell asleep and her slumber was sound and dreamless. She knew nothing of the terrible trouble and danger in store for her. Slowly the hours slipped away.

What was it that aroused the sleeping girl? At first she was conscious of a terrible feeling of suffocation. She could not breathe and a sickening odor filled her nostrils. She struggled and tried to cry out. An iron band held her fast and something was pressed over her mouth and nose. She could not move—she could not breathe! Was it the horrors of a terrible nightmare or was it real? Slowly she felt her senses leaving her. She seemed to be falling, falling; then she became unconscious.

When she recovered consciousness she seemed to be in a painful position. Her head was filled with shooting pains, and for a time she struggled ineffectually to open her eyes. She was conscious of a motion that convinced her that she was on the back of a horse, but she knew that she was not riding in a natural position.

Finally she opened her eyes. Darkness all around. She could see the head of the horse which was carrying her along, and she felt arms around her. What did it mean? She asked herself the question in vain. Suddenly she became aware that both her hands and feet were bound!

She was a captive!

"Hello!" growled an unfamiliar voice—the voice of him who held her in his arms—"ther leddy has kem rou'."

"Well, it is high time she did. I had begun to get a little nervous."

That voice! Where had she heard it? There was something strangely familiar about it, although it was harsh and subdued.

"Oh! I knew she'd come to all right," came from a third person. "She didn't get enough of the stuff to hurt her. I know my business when I attempt to put a person under the influence of ether. I was not a surgeon fourteen years for nothing."

"Let's see," laughed the familiar voice, "you were a surgeon before you got into that little difficulty with your wife's brother, and cut his throat by accident, wasn't you?"

"Now, why will you refer to that little accident!" exclaimed the one addressed. "You must know that it is a very painful remembrance to me."

"Yes, I should presume it would be painful, being that it happened in the family so. Now, here is Joe; he never likes to have me speak of the time when he knifed his second—"

"Say, Cap," interrupted the man who was carrying Nina, "fer Heaving's sake hev er leetle respect fer er pore cuss's feelin's! I was drunk as er b'iled owl w'en I dun that job. That was my fust piece of work in the line, but it wasn't my las', blame ther luck!"

"Well, well," said the one addressed as "Cap,"

"I don't know as I ought to say anything. We have all stained our fingers."

Nina shuddered. She was in the power of a party of desperadoes and cut-throats! She was in the arms of a murderer! Filled with horror, she tried to cry out, but something chained her tongue.

Who were these men? The strange unknown who had called himself "The Man from Sundown" spoke the truth when he said that the White Vultures were abroad in the darkness.

Nina could not tell how many of her captors there were, but she fancied that there were not more than four. She had only heard three speak. Where were these three men taking her? Where was her mother? Perhaps they had slain her! The thought was maddening.

She could not speak aloud, but she sent up a silent petition to Heaven for deliverance.

"It is about time for the moon to rise," observed the leader of the party of kidnappers.

"You're right, Cap," agreed the one who was carrying the girl; "you're jest right, an' ther nearer we are to our hole ther better it will be fer us. Ther Hills are full of reds."

"I care less for them than for our namesakes. That infernal gang is giving us a heap of trouble."

"I should say so," chimed in the ex-surgeon. "If they keep on as they have begun, they will drive us out of the Hills."

"They can't do that," the captain growled. "We will get at them by and by and exterminate the gang. Captain Claw is not the man to allow others to appropriate his name and palm themselves off as him. There will be trouble right away."

There was trouble sooner than he anticipated. A sudden clatter of iron-shod hoofs came to the ears of the kidnappers, and before the startled men could find a place of concealment, a party of shadow-like horsemen appeared before them. The next instant there were several bright flashes of light, revealing a band of masked men. The rattle of pistol-shots was followed by a cry from the leader of the kidnappers:

"They are three to our one! Fly for your lives!"

But there was one of his men who could not obey, for he lay dead on the ground, with Nina Harland clasped in his arms! His wicked life had come to a tragic termination.

The others wheeled their horses and fled into the darkness, pursued by the band of masked riders that had so suddenly come upon them. Away went pursued and pursuers, the sound of their horses' feet growing fainter and fainter, till it was finally lost in the distance.

Darkness and silence in the little valley. The night-wind moaned faintly and a wolf howled far away.

Slowly the moon crept up from behind the eastern hills and looked down into the silent valley. And she saw a white-faced, unconscious girl clasped in the arms of a dead man!

CHAPTER V.

MISS FLORA ANGELICA MAYBLOSSOM.

WHAT was that? A low moan which seemed scarcely more than the sighing of the wind. But it came from the lips of the white-faced girl as she slowly opened her eyes.

"Heavenly Father! where am I? What has happened?"

Nina's voice; she was conscious again. For some time the poor girl could not remember what had happened, but gradually everything came back to her. But she could not understand what had happened so suddenly after the unexpected appearance of the shadow-like horsemen. She had seen the bright flashes, heard the pistol-shots and felt herself falling. Then came a shock and unconsciousness.

Hark! Again the wolf howled in the distance, but this time he did not seem so far away.

The unfortunate girl's hands and feet were bound. She could not move them. She felt something about her body, and looking down, she saw two clasped hands. Until that instant she had not realized the horror of her position. Clasped in the arms of a dead man! A shriek of terror burst from her lips and was answered by the wolf, nearer than before.

"Heaven help me—heaven help me!" gasped the horror-stricken girl.

With a desperate effort, she succeeded in breaking those clasped hands apart and rolled away. The moonlight showed her the silent form of her former captor. He had worn a mask, but that had been torn from his face as he fell from the horse. His dark, bearded face was turned toward the girl and in the very center of his forehead she could see a small, round spot which

looked like a bullet-hole. The lead of the shadow-like horsemen was in the kidnapper's brain. His death had been instantaneous.

Again the wolf howled. He was coming nearer! Did he scent a feast?

Once more the helpless girl struggled to break the cords which held her hands, but, the effort was wasted. She only succeeded in making the thoughts cut deeper into the flesh. Then she prayed. Kind Heaven, was there no one near to release her? She did not know that while she lay unconscious two friends, who were searching for her, had been battling with a score of blood-thirsty red-men. She had heard nothing of the revolver-shots which had echoed through the Hills. She did not know that at that moment the two—an old man and a youth—were within the sound of her voice if she cried for help.

How white the moonlight looked! How ghastly was the immobile face of the dead man who lay so near! She could not take her eyes away from it. It fascinated her even while it filled her with horror.

A rustling sound near at hand, a long slim body that glides nearer and nearer, a hot breath on her cheek and two fiery eyes which glare into her own. The wolf has come to the feast!

Again the tortured girl uttered a wild shriek. The beast of prey, amazed at the sudden sound, slunk away and vanished in the nearest shadows. But, she knew that he did not go far, for she could see his gleaming eyes just beyond the line where the shadows and the moonlight met. He was waiting there. Perhaps he thought that she was wounded and dying. He would wait till she was dead then return to the feast. Ah! but she was not dying! If he waited for that, he would lose his feast that night.

"Some one will come—some one *must* come!"

But, what if they did not? The wolf would become tired of waiting, he would grow bolder when he saw that she did not stir, perhaps he would call a score of companions to the banquet, and then, bound hand and foot, she would meet a horrible death. The thought was maddening.

Look! The wolf is returning! Slowly, silently, like a part of the shadow from which he comes, he creeps out into the pale moonlight. His eyes gleam like two red coals and his tongue hangs from his froth-dripping jaws. He is moving toward the dead man!

The eyes of the helpless girl are fixed upon that terrible, slow-moving form. She tries to cry out again, but for an instant her tongue seems chained. Nearer, nearer comes the creeping brute. Suddenly, nerved by frenzy, the girl utters another wild shriek for help. The wolf stops, but, this time, he does not retreat. A moment he remains perfectly motionless; then he lifts his head and gives vent to a long, mournful howl, after which he squats on his haunches and seems to be listening.

What was that? Far, far away an answering howl! The girl hears it, and knows its terrible import! The lone wolf's companions are coming to the feast!

Suddenly out of the shadows springs a human form—a woman! With a peculiar jerky motion she runs forward and shakes a white apron at the startled wolf, crying shrilly:

"Shew, ye pesky critter! Shew, I say! If ye don't git out of this, I'll scald ye—that is, I would scald ye if I had any hot water."

The wolf waited for no second invitation, but, like a flash, he vanished in the shadows.

Nina was saved!

"That's right," nodded the strange little old woman, as she carefully smoothed out her apron. "You want to git when I say *git*. I reckon you've heerd tell of Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom before now by the way ye scatted."

"But, I thought I heerd somebody squeal over this way like they was hurt. Wonder who it was?"

"It was I," cried Nina. "Heaven bless you! you have saved me from that terrible creature!"

"Land sakes!" gasped the little woman, as she hurried to the girl's side. "I thought it was one of my own sex as was in trouble. I'd never, never run so for a man. Why, I'm all out of breathe! But, what's the trouble?"

Nina was too hysterical and overjoyed to explain then. The strange female seemed to understand this, and at once hastened to release the poor girl from the binding cords, a task which her nimble fingers soon completed.

"There, ye are all right, honey! I don't believe you are hurt a bit!"

"Heaven bless you! Heaven bless you!" cried Nina, bursting into a flood of tears.

Suddenly the little woman sprang to her feet and seemed to be listening. For an instant she remained thus, then she exclaimed:

"Land of mercy! somebody's comin'! We

must git away from here, *lively!* Can you walk, dear?"

"I don't know; I guess so," replied the girl. "Oh, I am sure that those terrible men are returning! Let us run!"

But she was not as strong as she thought, for when she got upon her feet she would have fallen had not the woman caught her.

"Oh, I cannot stand!" moaned Nina.

Without a word, the strange woman did a most surprising thing, for she caught the girl in her arms and ran swiftly away, disappearing in the shadows from whence she had come. She was none too soon to escape being seen, for, within a few moments Old Dave Dunston and Dandy reached the spot where the battle had taken place between the kidnappers and their masked foes. The sight of the dead man attracted their attention and they halted.

Meanwhile Nina's peculiar rescuer was hurrying away with the girl. After a few moments, Nina was able to walk, and, hand in hand, the two hurried on until both were nearly out of breath. They finally halted, the woman saying:

"There, I reckon we're all right now. If they foller us, they'll have to do it with dogs. Mercy on me! I never saw sich times! I really don't know what I am going to do. I have lost my means of locomotion, unless I fall back on the boss owned by Mr. Shank, and I am in a real pickle. Why! these Hills are full of men, and if there is anything on this Lord's earth I do detest it's a man!"

"Oh, how can I ever thank you for what you have done for me?" asked Nina, as she sunk down. "I know I should have gone mad in a few moments more."

"Well, I don't wonder, with that pesky critter smellin' round and a corpse so close. It was enough to give any one the histderricks. But, you are all right now, dear, for I'll take care of ye, don't ye fear."

"You are so good!" and Nina clasped the queer woman's hand. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Sart'in, sart'in. My name is Flora Angelica Mayblossom. Now, what's yourn, and how came ye in such a scrape?"

Briefly and clearly the girl told her new-found friend of her adventures since she started with her mother to find her long-lost father. The woman listened with apparent interest, giving utterance to frequent exclamations. When the girl had completed her story, her companion vented her feelings with several vigorous expressions.

"It's jest a shame that such things can be did in a free and 'lightened country!" she snapped. "I never went to no ladies' semetary to git my eddycation, but I know enough to know that there ought to be a law to prevent such thin's. Perhaps there is a law. If there is, why don't they reinforce it?"

"It is impossible to enforce the law in this wild country, I suppose."

"Well, that may be so, but if Uncle Sam's got more land than he can properly manage, he'd oughter give it to somebody who has got less. That's my idee in a cokernut shell."

"You have not told me how you happened to come to my rescue at such an opportune moment, Mrs. Mayblossom."

"Mrs. Nothing! Excuse me, but my name is Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Mayblossom, and I hope you will forgive me. The truth is, I am not in a condition to get anything right. I am so shaken up that I am apt to get everything wrong."

Miss Mayblossom's heart was touched when she saw how pained and confused Nina was and so hastened to say:

"That's all right, dear. Perhaps I spoke out a little sharper than I ought to, but, it allus starts me to be connected with a man, for I've steared clear of the plaguey critters till I am forty-seven years old and I don't think I'll be pickin' up with one now at this late day."

"But how came you to appear so fortunately?"

"Well, ye see I'm on the way to Custer City to meet my sister—she's married!—and, last night, I camped not fur from here. I s'pose that he wandered away sometime in the night, for I missed him when I woke up, and so I started out to find him. I heerd you holler and thought it was one of my sex in distress, so I just scrambled toward the spot wher' the sound come from and I found you. That's how it was."

"And who is this him that you speak of—a traveling companion or guide?"

Miss Mayblossom uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"Well, I guess *not!*" she replied, vigorously. "Him hain't no man, I'll tell you *that!* Him is my mule!"

CHAPTER VI.

DANDY HOLDS THE DROP.

It was a startling discovery which Frank Fenway had made. Edwin Hollis and Nina were missing and two of the horses were gone. What did it mean?

Treachery!

The young Easterner believed that that one word solved the problem. Hollis was a traitor and had abducted Nina.

"My God!" groaned Frank, in dismay. "This will craze Mrs. Harland."

For some time he was undecided what to do. He stood with one hand pressed to his forehead, trying to think of the best plan of action; but the shock of the sudden discovery had so unnerved him that he found it next to impossible to collect his wits. Finally he muttered:

"I will make the round of the camping-spot and examine everything. It is not impossible that the horses are near, for perhaps Hollis moved them for some reason. Nina may have arisen in her sleep and wandered away. If so, we shall probably be able to find her with little difficulty."

He felt that there was little hope, but he would not impart the terrible news to Nina's mother till he was sure that there was no mistake. Carefully and slowly he walked around the camping-spot, but he found nothing. With a groan of anguish he approached Mrs. Harland.

"I will not tell her the whole truth at once," he muttered. "I dare not tell her what I fear. It is plain that Hollis has abducted the poor girl, unless—"

He reeled back a step as a sudden thought struck him.

Perhaps Nina had fled with the missing man! Only an instant did this thought stagger the young Easterner. He recovered himself.

"I am a fool to think of such a thing," he said, hoarsely. "She would never do such a thing. She is as good and pure as the stars above me! There is only one solution to this midnight disappearance. She has been kidnapped! Who did the dastardly act? Ah! where is Edwin Hollis? I have not liked that man from the first. He joined the train in a singular manner, and his actions have not always been above suspicion. I am half-inclined to believe that he led us away from the train purposely, and perhaps he is hand and glove with the bloody reds; perhaps he is a white renegade, an outlaw, a vulture of the plains and mountains!"

These were not very consoling thoughts.

Frank approached the spot where Mrs. Harland was sleeping, and knelt down beside her. But then he hesitated about arousing her, dreading to tell her of his terrible discovery. The pale moonlight which fell upon her face showed that she was sleeping soundly.

Finally she summoned enough to arouse her. She started up, asking what was the matter. With as few words as possible he told her what he had learned. At first the woman seemed dazed, for she sat perfectly still, not uttering a word. Fearing what would follow, the young man hastened to say:

"Nina may be near by. It is possible that she has only wandered away a short distance. Perhaps she did so in her sleep, and Hollis followed to bring her back."

Mrs. Harland shook her head and lifted both her clasped hands with a gesture of inexpressible anguish. Not a word came from her white lips, and Frank noted that the moonlight made her face look like that of a corpse.

"My dear Mrs. Harland," he hastened to say, "we will find her all right, never fear."

She appeared to arouse herself with a struggle.

"Gone!" she gasped. "Gone—my darling child! Oh, Heavenly Father! why must you visit this affliction upon me!"

Then she wrung her hands while her features worked convulsively. Frank was an amazed and startled witness of this unlooked for manner of expressing her anguish. He had expected that she would be wild with grief, but had thought that she would show it in a different manner.

Suddenly the stricken mother arose to her feet, at the same time grasping Frank by the arm.

"Come!" she cried; "we must follow them! Quick! You say that only two horses are gone; we will follow on the others. He must not carry her away!"

"But how are we to know which way they went? I fear we cannot follow them!"

"They went into the Hills. That man is a villain! He has been heading for the Hills all the time. I am sure that he carried her off into the Hills. Oh! Nina, my poor, poor child."

"I believe you are right," Frank admitted. "If you are, one thing is certain: Hollis knows this country, and our finding our way successfully thus far was not an accident. Yes, they have probably gone on into the Hills. We will follow."

It was not long before Frank had the two horses saddled and bridled ready for the journey. Mrs. Harland was eager to start. Frank was filled with wonder as he looked at her, for she had not shed a tear, although she was wringing her hands and moaning in a pitiful manner.

"You must bear up, Mrs. Harland," he said, encouragingly. "A kind Providence will bring everything round all right in the end. Nina shall be restored to you."

"Heaven grant that you are right!" came from her lips. "But I fear the worst. Oh! I shall never forgive myself for letting her accompany me into this terrible country! I did not want her to come, but she was determined and I could not persuade her to remain behind."

Frank assisted her to mount, then sprung upon the back of his own horse.

"Hollis said that he thought we could ford this stream almost anywhere in this vicinity," he observed, "so I do not think there will be any trouble in getting across."

There was not. Ten minutes later they were on the other bank. Heading their horses toward the northwest, they plunged into the foothills.

Morning broke over the Black Hills country, and found them many miles from the place where they camped at sunset the night before; but they had found nothing of those for whom they were searching. Frank had begun to realize how foolish was their unsystematic method of searching for the traitor and the victim of his treachery, and was growing disheartened, although he did not permit his companion to become aware of it. Mrs. Harland was calmer than he had hoped she would be, but her face was set with a stony look of despair.

Just as the sun rose above the eastern peaks, a horseman came galloping down the valley along which they were traveling. As he approached, they saw that he was a young man, well mounted and fully armed, a Winchester repeater being slung across his back. As soon as the stranger saw them, he drew his horse down to a slower pace, and surveyed them closely as he approached.

The others hailed the appearance of the unknown with eager joy, for his face was white, and they hoped that he might aid them in some way. Frank gazed closely at the young man as he approached, but could form no satisfactory estimate of his true character.

A short distance away, the stranger halted and threw up his left hand, while his right rested conveniently near the butt of a revolver.

"Hold there a moment!" he cried in a commanding way. "Let's introduce ourselves before we get any closer."

Frank and Mrs. Harland stopped promptly.

"That's right!" laughed the solitary horseman. "We are within short range for talking, and can soon come to an understanding. I hope to find you friendly, and I presume that I shall not be disappointed, judging from your appearance."

"We are friends to all honest people," declared Frank.

"Good enough," came from the cautious horseman. "If you are friends to honest people, we are not enemies. But, it was something of a surprise for me to run upon a lady and a gentleman here. What are your names and where are you from?"

As briefly and plainly as possible, Frank answered the question, and seeming satisfied, the young stranger rode forward.

"My name is Robert Rexford," he informed them, as he drew rein a few feet away. "I am from Deadwood, where I have an interest in mining enterprises. Business drew me to this part of the Hills. I am glad to meet you, but very sorry to find you in such an unpleasant predicament."

"And we are glad to meet you, Mr. Rexford," Frank assured. "The sight of a white man's face is refreshing. Perhaps you may be able to aid us in some way."

Rexford shook his head. "I fear not," he said. "Business and my own interests demand that I return to Deadwood at once. If I can advise you in any way, how-

ever, I shall be glad to do so. Please explain the entire unfortunate affair to me as well as you can in a few words. I did not quite understand it before."

Again Frank repeated the story of their misfortune, and the man from Deadwood listened closely. When the young Easterner had finished, Rexford said:

"I fear that you made a mistake in at once attempting to find the unfortunate young lady. You should have waited till morning and then tried to track the kidnapper. It is a dirty piece of business, and there is very little hope of your finding the young lady unless you have aid. The only thing that I can see to be done is to go to Custer and obtain the aid of a competent trailer and a party that will fight for you if well paid. Then you may be able to hunt down the abductors of your child, dear madam, for I believe that traitor has comrades who aided him in his dastardly work."

Before either Mrs. Harland or Frank could speak, two more horsemen swept into view. The young Easterner uttered a cry of delight, for he recognized them both.

They were Old Dave Dunston and Dandy. Straight toward the three persons rode the old guide and his Dandy Pard, the border ranger giving vent to a whoop of recognition as he saw them.

"Who are those men?" asked Robert Rexford, fingering the butt of a revolver a little nervously.

"They are friends," replied Frank. "Ah! Mrs. Harland, Old Dismal will aid us to find Nina, and if he cannot find her, no man living can."

"Head o' John ther Prophet!" the border tramp exclaimed, as he and Dandy dashed up. "Ef 'tain't Mrs. Harlan' an' Fenway I don't know bullets frum beans! But, whar in ther name o' ther seven wonders is Miss Nina an' that thar Hollis?"

Before this question could be answered, something of a startling nature took place. Dismal's foppish pard and the young man from Deadwood stared straight into each other's eyes for an instant, and then both grasped their revolvers. But, Dandy was a little the swiftest, and the *click-click* of his weapon was followed by the ringing command:

"Stop where you are, Robert Rexford! I hold the drop! If you value your life, don't attempt to lift that revolver, for if you do, a bullet-hole in your skull will admit the morning sunlight!"

CHAPTER VII.

DANDY'S ACCUSATION—HOLLIS'S LITTLE TRICK.

It was a thrilling tableau.

Straight into each other's eyes glared the two young men, their faces marked by emotions that it would be difficult to describe. Dandy had been amazingly swift in drawing and getting the drop, but Old Dismal noticed that the hand which held the revolver leveled at Robert Rexford's head trembled a little, showing him that his little pard was fairly boiling with excitement.

Frank Fenway and Mrs. Harland looked on in amazement.

After a few moments of silence, Rexford spoke:

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And what do you want of me?"

A harsh, unpleasant laugh broke from the lips of the youth with the revolver.

"Who am I?" he sneered, in a voice which made Old Dave stare at him in amazement. "As if you did not know me, Robert Rexford! Ha! you know me well! and I reckon you know what I want!"

"You are a stranger to me," declared the man from Deadwood. "I do not know you."

"Your face gives you the lie," came sharply from Dandy. "You have betrayed yourself, and your crooked tongue will not help you. Do you deny that you are Robert Rexford?"

For an instant the threatened man hesitated; then evidently realizing that it would avail him nothing to deny his name, he replied:

"Why, certainly I am Robert Rexford. Why should I deny it? There is nothing about the name that I am ashamed of."

"That is because you have no shame in you. If you had a spark of manhood left you would be ashamed of the name."

Rexford's face, which had been very white, now flashed with rage. For several moments he was unable to utter a word, so great was his anger, but he finally hissed:

"You shall pay dearly for those words, you insolent young puppy! No man can insult me

in that manner and not be called to an account."

"I shall be happy to accommodate you," smiled the little dandy, growing cool as the other became excited. "It will give me great pleasure to put a bullet through your black heart!"

"You shall have a chance to try it, I promise you, and the sooner arrangements are made the better it will suit me."

"We will come to that directly. But, before I prepare you for a funeral I wish to ask you some questions."

"Well, ask away, and do not keep us waiting here all day. I have business in Deadwood which I must get back to, for it needs my attention."

"Which I promise you it shall never receive. I presume that you have already made your will."

An impatient exclamation came from Rexford's lips.

"We are wasting time in foolish talk. Come, sir, if you have anything to say before we get down to business, say it."

Dandy leaned forward in the saddle and glared straight into the eyes of the man from Deadwood, as he hurled this question at him:

"Where is my sister, Robert Rexford?"

It was evident that the one addressed had been expecting such a question, for he gave no indications of surprise.

"Your sister?" he echoed. "Young man, you are either foolish or crazy. What do I know about your sister?"

A cry of fury escaped Dandy's lips.

"You treacherous devil!" cried the youth, while he trembled from head to foot with excitement. "You know full well where she is! She is dead!"

"I know nothing at all about your sister," protested Rexford. "Her death is nothing to me."

"You lie!" screamed the now infuriated young man; "you lie, Robert Rexford, for you killed her!"

Rexford turned to the wondering witnesses of this exciting scene, a look of pretended amazement on his face.

"He is mad—mad as a March hare! Why, I never saw his sister in my life!"

"Thet won't go down," came from Old Dismal. "Thet boyee is my pard. If he sez that you killed his sister, you're ther cuss w'at did ther job."

Rexford gave the old ranger a contemptuous look.

"You're as much of a fool as he, old man. But, it isn't pleasant to have even a mess of fools for enemies. If I fight with this young whipper-snapper and lay him out, you will probably take it upon yourself to avenge him, and will shoot me down without giving me a show."

"Nothing of the kind," put in Dandy. "Dave Dunston shall promise that, if you drop me in a fair fight, he will let you depart unmolested."

But the old man shook his head grimly.

"I hain't goin' ter meek no promises thet I'll hev ter break," he declared. "If he sh'ud drap ye, lad, I don't believe I c'd hole merself."

At this moment another horseman came into view, galloping wildly down the valley. As soon as he saw the party ahead, he snatched off his hat and began to wave it wildly around his head.

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!" broke from Dunston's lips. "I'll bet a flop-eared mule thet's Edwin Hollis!"

The old plainsman was right. When the horseman had a proached a little nearer it was seen that he wore a bandage about his head, and he was terribly excited.

"The cursed traitor!" gritted Frank Fenway, as he drew a revolver. "Now I will have the truth from his lips, or he shall eat lead!"

As soon as Hollis was within hailing distance, he cried:

"Fly, fly for your lives! More than thirty red-skins are pursuing me! If you remain where you are, you will be seen in a few moments and escape will be the next thing to an impossibility."

His words produced something like consternation in the little group, and, taking advantage of the excitement, Rexford made a break for liberty. Before he could be intercepted, he wheeled his horse, and, giving the animal the spurs, went dashing away. Dandy uttered a cry of rage and fired two hasty shots, but the fugitive was untouched. Then the little spectacled fop started in pursuit.

"Buzzards an' eagles!" grunted Old Dismal. "I reckon ther Ole Boy has bruck loose now! I'd foller ther lad, but I reckon I'd best stay an'

help stan' off ther smoky-skins if they diskiver this gang."

"Which they will surely do unless we find a place of concealment swiftly," declared Hollis. "We can never hope to hold them at bay here."

"Right you are," assented the old guide. "Foller me, an' I'll try ter take ye all to er place o' safety."

Without hesitation, they followed the old plainsman, feeling certain that he would take them out of danger if any one could. Dave urged his horse in a way that told he believed that there might be good reasons for Hollis's fright. In a short time he turned into a narrow ravine through which ran a tiny stream. They were obliged to proceed along the ravine at single file. Old Dismal was ahead, then came Mrs. Harland and Frank. Hollis brought up the rear.

In thirty minutes' time they made their way into a round, basin-like valley.

"Hyer we are," the guide announced. "We kin defend this place erg'in' a hundred reds, fer they kin only enter one at a time, an' we kin pick 'em off as fast as they cum—Hullo! Great ginger! Whar's Hollis?"

The man who had warned them of danger had disappeared! He had quietly fallen behind while they were coming through the narrow ravine and now he was not with them. Frank Fenway instantly understood the trick.

"He has fooled us—the two-faced scoundrel!" cried the young man. "He fell behind while we were coming through the ravine."

"But w'at fer w'd he want ter do thet?" asked the old borderman, who knew nothing of Nina's abduction.

"He is a traitor!" Frank declared. "He is a miscreant of the deepest dye!"

Then he told Old Dave of their adventures since becoming separated from the train. The ranger listened with interest and amazement.

"Thar's no doubt erbout it," he declared, when the young Easterner had finished. "My pard was right! That Hollis is er sallymander, an' w'en I ketch him I'll wring his neck—I will, by ther rock o' ages!"

"And you will help us to find Nina?" cried Mrs. Harland, who had remained silent for a very long time.

"To be sart'in I will!" was the prompt reply. "We'll find her all right, never fear. You jest cheer up an' rest ashooored thet she'll be brought back all right."

"Your words give me new hope," said the poor woman, her face lighting up. "I had begun to despair, for we seemed so helpless, and we did not know how to begin the search."

"I reckon ther proper way ter begin ther s'arch is ter fin' that thar traitor. If I git holt o' him, I'll wring suthin' out o' him or bu'st."

"He can not be very far away now," observed Frank.

"You're right, an' I'm goin' ter git after him. You stay right here with Mrs. Harland. If I do not get on track of Hollis to oncet, I will cum back an' take ye to ernuther place I know of whar you'll be shore ter be safe. You kin hold this basin erg'in' ennyone as'll try ter cum in ther way we did. Keep yer eyes peeled an' look sharp fer reds."

"I do not believe that Hollis was pursued by Indians."

"No more do I. Thet was er trick; but I'll show him er trick w'ith two o' thet. Tra-lar-loo. I'm off."

Then the eccentric old fellow rode into the ravine and disappeared.

Nearly two hours later, Old Dismal returned. The waiting man and woman noted with disappointment that he was alone. As he sprang down from his horse's back, he shook his head, saying:

"Ther blamed critter guv me ther slip. He's ez cunnin' ez er fox an' knows these Hills ez well ez I do—blame his skin!"

"And you can give me no tidings of Nina?" Mrs. Harland asked.

"Nary tidings; but, don't you git down-hearted. I'll fine her as shore as my name's Dave Dunstan. I never make a promise but I keep it. I hev cum back ter take you two ter er better place than this, whar you will be safe while I am huntin' fer ther gal. If I git my paws onter thet thar Hollis, he'll think er reg'ler double-actin' dismal disaster has run bunt erg'in' him—he jest will!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FACE BEHIND THE MASK.

NINA HARLAND was forced to laugh when Miss Mayblossom so emphatically declared that

"him" was not a man but was her mule. The girl found the little old woman amusing in the extreme.

"Of course you will pardon me again," Nina hastened to say: "but, from the way you spoke I thought that you must be referring to a traveling companion or guide. It cannot be that you are traveling through this wild country without a guide."

"Can't it? Well now, I'd like ter know why it can't. I reckon I'm old enough to take keer of myself, hain't I?"

"Oh, certainly! But this is a very wild country, and I should think you would be afraid of losing your way."

"Losin' nothin'! Why, a poor lone woman like me has got to suspend upon herself. As for suspendin' on a man, why that's something I'd never never do!"

"But these Hills are full of Indians. Are you not afraid of them?"

"I never yet was ska't of anything that wore britches," asserted the little woman; "and as for Injuns, some of them hain't got decency enough to retire themselves in that much masculine wearin' apparel. But they can't frighten me with their bare legs, they want to understand that."

"But the Indians are bloodthirsty wretches, and there is danger that they will come upon you and murder you."

"Well now, if they do that, they will have to get round right smart, for - I hain't fool enough to travel without fortifying myself with a pistol. And I can shoot. I tell you, Injuns had best navigate clear of me if they have a desire to retain their usual health."

"And you are not in the least afraid of them?"

"Not a bit," assured Miss Mayblossom. "I've heerd a good deal tole of the pesky critters, but I never thought more than half of it was true. Land-a-massy! it couldn't all be true! Don't you be skeered of the Injuns, honey, for I won't let the horrid critters touch you."

And Nina really felt quite safe with the self, reliant little old maid. Miss Mayblossom had a crabbed, crusty way of speaking, but the girl had already decided that she was a kind-hearted creature.

"As soon as you can walk a little, we will presume the hunt for that contrary mule," the little woman said. "I'll find the disgraceful critter if I have to hunt these Hills all over. He's just as mean as he can be, for I used him just like he was a valuable pony. But that's always the way with anything of the masculine gender."

It was some time before Nina was able to walk, for she had been so frightened that her strength had almost entirely deserted her and it returned very slowly. Finally she arose and, with the assistance of her companion, was able to walk slowly. Miss Mayblossom seemed to have forgotten that they were in any danger, for her tongue rattled almost incessantly. She talked of almost everything imaginable and finished each separate topic with a crabbed dissertation on men. From her talk one would have imagined that she hated all mankind most heartily, but Nina was inclined to believe that within her heart the crusty old maid secretly admired the very ones that she pretended to so heartily dislike. At last the girl was unable to resist the temptation to give her a sly thrust.

"Oh! you will get married some day, Miss Mayblossom," she declared.

The little woman stopped in her tracks.

"Married?" she squealed. "The good Lord reserve me! Me git married! Never so long as I have the control of my seven senses! There never no man dared to ask me to have him so fur, and it ain't best for them that they ever do! Why, if a man dared to insult me in that out-dacious manner, I'd-I'd—"

"Marry him."

"Goodness gracious, no! I believe I'd scald him—I do really. I'd do that, or faint dead away."

"Those are the last things I would think of doing if a man asked me to marry him," laughed Nina.

"Oh! I s'pose you are like all other girls," nodded the little woman. "You'd jump at the first chance."

"Not if I did not love him."

"Love! Stuff! nonsense! bosh! I've heerd a lot about that ere commotion called love, but I never took no stock in such silliness. Love! Fiddlesticks!"

"Then you do not believe in love?"

"Not the kind of smackety-smack love that is all kisses and squeezes and lovey-doveys and that kind of silliness. If there is anything in

this Lord's world that disgusts me it's that kind of business!"

Nina was compelled to sit down and rest several times, but she slowly grew stronger, much to her queer companion's satisfaction.

"You'll be all right by and by," assured Miss Flora. "If we are ever lucky enough to uncover that mule, you shall ride. I am old and tough and can walk well enough."

"Why, Miss Mayblossom, I did not know that you were a poet!"

"Well I am you will see; I love poetree. Although an old maid quite sober and staid, I've writ for the papers, but never got paid. There, beat that if you can and I'll try it again."

"Good! excellent!" laughed Nina, clapping her hands. "Why, you are a born poet, Miss Mayblossom!"

"You're not the fu'st one as has told me so," declared the little woman. "Why, I once had a forty-eight line poem in the *Scrubbyville Bugle* with my name signed to it in full, Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom. It created quite a sensation in them parts, and 'most everybody was commertatin' on it. But the editor of the paper was a horrid mean thing, for he never thanked me for it, and when I sent him another, he lost it somehow by accident in something they call the waste-basket. When it failed to disappear in the next issue, I called to discover it, but he said that the devil had taken the stuff in the waste-basket to kindle the fire and it was gone. And don't you think, he really tried to make me believe that the devil built his fires every mornin'. I just give him a piece of my mind for talkin' so and darin' to lose my poem even by accident, and then I left, and I never sent him no more poetry."

"Which served him right."

"Yes, I think so, though some folks said I was a little hard on him."

"And did you never try any of your poems anywhere else?"

"Yes, I sent one to the *Century Magazine* once."

"What was its fate?"

"Oh! the editor sent it back to me along with a printed piece that said something about their being overcrowded with matter and that 'cause they couldn't use my poem was no sign that it wasn't good for nothing. Oh, they was perlit, I tell you!"

At this moment the braying of a mule came to their ears, causing Miss Mayblossom to utter an exclamation of delight.

"There, that's him! I know his voice! That's that pesky runaway mule!"

She was right. They soon came upon the mule which was standing saddled and bridled and appeared to be hitched in some bushes.

"His bridle-rein caught some way," said Miss Mayblossom, as she examined it. "If it hadn't bin for that, I guess I'd lost him for good."

She assisted Nina to mount the scrawny little beast, and once more they pushed on. Miss Mayblossom did not say where she was going and the girl asked no questions, having decided to trust everything to her peculiar companion. For nearly two hours they pushed on, then the little woman called a halt.

"We will stop here for the rest of the night," she said. "I reckon this is as good a place as we can find, and we are so fur away that your foes will not be liable to find you to-night."

She removed the saddle and small pack from the mule's back, and then unbridled and tethered the animal. After this was done, she opened the small pack and removed a blanket, which she passed to Nina, saying:

"There, my dear, wrop yourself in that and git a good nap before sunrise. I will look out that nothing burts you, don't ye be ska't."

She would listen to no words from the girl, but compelled her to lay down at once and try to get some sleep. Ten minutes later the exhausted girl was sleeping soundly, while the faithful little woman squatted near at hand, wide awake and watchful, keeping guard while the last hours of the night stole by.

The morning sun was shining brightly when Nina awoke. The first thing that she heard was Miss Mayblossom's low, cracked voice singing a familiar Gospel hymn.

"Ah! so you are awake, my dear," cried the strange woman, as Nina threw aside the blanket and arose. "That is good, for breakfast is all ready. Goodness gracious!"

The exclamation was caused by the sudden appearance of a masked figure that stepped out of some bushes near by.

"Land of goodness! a man!" snuffed Miss Flora.

The stranger removed his wide-brimmed hat and bowed politely, at the same time saying:

"A man, at your service, ladies."

His voice was low and musical, sounding strangely familiar to Nina. He was somewhat below medium height, and was dressed in black from head to foot, his pants being tucked into the tops of a pair of high-heeled riding-boots which were armed with spurs. His small hands were incased in black gloves. Not a weapon was visible about him.

"Now, who in the name of goodness are you?" demanded Miss Mayblossom, as soon as she could recover her composure.

"I am Captain Claw, chief of the California Vultures," was the cool reply, as the masked man bowed again.

Nina uttered a little cry of surprise and fear, but her fearless companion snapped:

"Well, Captain Claw, will you have the goodness to make yourself skeerse in these parts? We hain't got a bit of use for such critters as you."

The mask laughed softly.

"A rather curt dismissal," was his opinion. "But, really, are you not a little hasty? I saw that you ladies were alone, and thought that you might be in distress, so I came to offer my services, if I could aid you in any way."

"Well, we don't need ye, thank gracious!" nodded Miss Mayblossom. "We don't care for the aid of ary man that hides his face beneath a mask—so there!"

"That settles it, then," said the self-confessed outlaw. "I shall not try to force my services upon you. Good-morning."

Bowing low once more, he replaced the hat upon his head. As he did so the fastenings of the mask became detached in some way, and it fell from his face. A fresh, boyish countenance—the face of a youth not more than twenty-one—was revealed! Nina Harland uttered a low cry of amazement as she saw the face thus revealed.

As for Captain Claw, as the intruder had called himself, he seemed confused and dismayed by this unexpected accident. Quickly snatching up the treacherous mask, he sprang into the bushes and disappeared.

For several moments after he had vanished Nina sat staring at the place where she had last seen him. Finally she turned to Miss Mayblossom, saying:

"I know that young man who has confessed that he is chief of the terrible band called the White Vultures. He was with the wagon-train and refused to give any name. I called him Mr. Nameless—some called him Dandy!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SURPRISE FOR OLD DISMAL.

"YAS," continued Old Dave, grimly, "I'll interjuce thet thar Hollis ter a s'prise party if I git my grippers onter him. He's a p'izen snake—that's my 'pinion o' him."

"I do not believe he was alone in this kidnapping business," Frank Fenway declared.

"Most probably not," agreed the old ranger. "It w'u'dn't s'prise me a bit ter l'arn thet he was connected with ther gang as calls themselves the Californy Vultures."

"I have heard of them. They are a gang of desperadoes that have lately invaded the Hills, are they not?"

"Yes, they kem hyer frum Californy, whar it was too warm fer their health. They are probably ther tuffest gang o' lan' pirates ever seen in these parts."

"What are they, regular road-agents?"

"Waal, I reckon they are red-dy ter turn their han's ter most ennythin' crooked. I don't know fer sure thet they have held up a stage since they kem inter ther Hills, but it is pritty sart'in thet they have had their fingers in ther wreckin' o' one or two wagon-trains. They dun ther work disguised as red-skins, an' w'ile people war cussin' ther red rinos, they war deevidin' ther spoils. Oh, they are a wicked gang!"

"And you fear that my child has fallen into the hands of such inhuman monsters?" gasped Mrs. Harland. "Merciful Heaven! It were better that she had died!"

"Now don't you go ter thinkin' thet way," the borderman cried. "I have promised ter git her out o' ther han's o' thet Hollis, an' I'll do it if he has all ther crooked lan'-sharks in ther country at his back. Ther ole man never mecks a promise an' breaks it."

"Heaven grant you may be successful!" was the prayer of the grief-stricken mother.

"I allus succeed, even if I have ter wade through dismal disasters clean up ter my ears. I've b'in drowned, shot, clawed up by catty-mounts, chawed up by grizzlies, run through a steam-thrasher, froze ter death an' roasted,

'sides bein' blown inter more'n nine thousan' pieces by dyminite—yet, hyer I be. W'y, w'en Ole Dave sots, out to do a thing, death an' destruction can't stop him!"

Then noticing that Frank was gazing at him with a strange look on his face, the eccentric old guide continued:

"P'r'aps you doubt that I've b'in through all thet I say I hev, but it's ther Gospil truth. Sum critters will believe 'most everythin' else, but w'en I tell them that I was blowed up by dyminite, they kick. It's er solemcolly fack jest ther same, an' I was blowed so high thet I was able ter studdy 'stronermys without ther aid o' er mikroskope. Thet was ther time thet I diskivered a new planet w'at none o' ther 'stronermers didn't know northin' 'bout. But, great ginger, I w'u'dn't go through thet orjeal erg'in ter diskiver er hull bushel basket full o' planets!"

The old man paused and looked very grave as he observed that Frank Fenway could not restrain his mirth.

"Young man," said the imaginative old Hills tramp, "you are young an' full o' doubts. You hev leetle ijoe how much er critter o' ther human gender kin pass through an' live ter tell o' it. If I sh'u'd tell ye er hundredth part o' my adventures, you'd begin ter suspec' thet I was stretchin' things er leetle. I'm a man as has traveled all over ther worl' an' a part o' Canada. I hev froze ter death at ther 'Quator, an' been baked at ther North Pole. Baked! W'y, that word don't ha'fe 'spress it! I once laid in ther shade o' er crabapple tree on ther coast o' Labrydore w'en ther sun was so hot thet I c'u'd hear ther grease sizz as it fried out o' me, an' w'en one side was baked brown, I rolled over an' cooked ther other side. I was ther only man as survived outer er ship's crew o' thirty-seven men thet landed thar thet day. I'm tellin' you ther sollem facks w'en I say thet ther sun was so hot thet ther ocean boiled like ther water in er tea-kittle, an' ther sound o' ther b'ilin' water was as loud as thunder!"

"That was pretty hot for a cold country like Labrador," Frank agreed, laughing heartily. "But, while we are remaining here, are we not forgetting that Nina is in danger?"

"Ghost o' ole Goliath! I dunno but we are. I sed I'd take yer ter er safer place than this, an' I will. Jest git reddey ter foller me."

In a few moments Mrs. Harland and Frank were ready; then the guide led them out of the valley by the way of the ravine through which they entered.

"I know whar thar is a deserted cabin in ther most onhandy part o' er gulch whar thar hain't no one likely ter cum. I'm goin' ter take you thar."

Old Dave led the way down the valley.

Nearly two hours later they reached the cabin. It was, indeed, situated in a most remote and inaccessible place. There was little liability that our friends would be discovered by enemies while they remained there.

"Now," said the guide, "you folks must be hungry. Young man, jest you build a fire while I go out arter grub. I'll fine suthin' ter shoot."

He did, for he was not away from the cabin long before those left behind heard the ringing report of his rifle. A short time later, he appeared with the rear quarters of a young bear which he had killed. Fenway already had a fire going in the stone fire place, and it was not long before the meat was roasting over the coals. Dunston had stopped at the deserted cabin more than once before and knew just where to find some tin dishes, two steel knives and plenty of salt. With these things, the old man was able to set quite a table.

Both Dunston and Frank partook ravenously of the delicious meat, but it was with difficulty that they induced Mrs. Harland to eat a bit. The poor woman seemed dazed and lifeless, for she would sit quite still and stare in a vacant manner straight at the cabin wall. The old borderman shook his head gravely and looked troubled as he noted her unnatural actions.

When he had satisfied his hunger, the Border Nomad arose and took up his long-barreled rifle. Then he turned to Mrs. Harland and said:

"I'm goin' now ter look arter yer gal. I'll fine her, don't fergit thet. You shell see her all safe an' soun' afore long. You jest want ter keep up yer spirrits an' take it easy. Get as much sleep as ye kin, fer w'en I kem back I may want ter shove fer ther nearest camp erbout as fast as posserble. Remember, I'll be back afore long an' I'll bring ther gal."

Then, motioning for Frank to follow, he passed out of the cabin. Frank went out imme-

diately and found Dave taking a drink from a small spring close to the corner of the cabin. The old borderman arose as the Easterner stopped by his side.

"Boyee," said he, impressively, "I want ye ter keep a cluss watch onter thet leddy. She acts wrong, an' I sh'u'dn't be er bit s'prised if this loss o' her darter kinder tained her head. Don't lose sight o' her fer enny length o' time. Of course I can't tell thet I'll be able ter bring back her gal ter oncet, but I made thet kine o' talk ter her ter kinder brace her up. I'll fine ther pore leetle gal if I kin, an' if I git mer han's onter thet traitor, Hollis—Waal, you kin kinder 'magine w'at will took place."

The horses were concealed in the midst of some scrub bushes near the cabin. Old Dismal now went for his animal, and was ready to depart a few seconds later. With a few more words of caution, he rode away.

Midday was past, and the veteran of the mountains and plains was riding slowly along, keeping a vigilant watch on all sides, when suddenly a wild-appearing figure seemed to leap out of the very ground just ahead of him, at the same time uttering a wild laugh that came near causing the ranger's hair to stand on end. In an instant one of Dismal's ancient-looking revolvers covered the stranger.

The borderman uttered an exclamation of surprise as he scanned the figure which had startled both himself and his horse. He saw a tall man whose garments were literally in rags, and whose face and head were covered with a matted mass of long hair and beard, a pair of restless, gleaming eyes shining from the midst of the latter. Not a weapon did the apparition hold, but he flung his hands above his head, crying out:

"Hold! stand! Listen while I speak!"

"Waal, who in ther name o' ther seven sleepers are you?" demanded the astonished horseman.

"I am Shadow, the Man from Sundown," was the reply.

"Waal, Shadder, ther Man from Sundown, whar did ye cum frum? I sw'ar ye popped up out o' ther 'arth like a spirrit! It made my ha'r rize."

"Ha, ha, ha! I came out of the earth like a spirrit! I am a spirrit! You did not see me as you rode along, for I did not want you to. When I was ready to appear, I did so at the command of my will. I can disappear as quickly. I am the spirrit of a man who was hanged till he was dead, dead, dead!"

"You are as crazy as a bed-bug," was Dave's plainly-spoken opinion.

The wild man of the Hills seemed offended at the old ranger's words.

"You say I am crazy, but, that is because you are nothing but a living human. Your eyesight is blinded to the mysteries of the future. I have rent the vail asunder and passed into the unknown."

"You are the critter w'at kem howlin' round our camp las' nite disturbin' our sweet slumbers," asserted the ranger. "I know ye, fer ye made ther same kinder talk las' nite that you are makin' now."

"But I told you the truth, you know I did. Yet you do not believe me when I say that I am a man who was hanged. It is true. They found me far, far away in the 'Golden State.' They were a band of men whose faces were covered by masks—they were vultures of the gold land! They hanged me at sundown till I was dead. Then they rode away, but an avenging spirrit followed! One by one they have died, and my hand struck them down! They fled from the gold land, but the avenger has followed them here! Almost all of the band that hanged the man at sundown have perished, but the chief still lives. His days are numbered!"

"But w'at's this stuff ter me?"

"Ha! I had forgotten. I came to tell you something. You have lost a friend—ha! ha! a pretty friend! It is a pity that you cannot read his heart! His face is smooth and he looks like a gentle youth, but ah! his heart! You have seen a night of Stygian blackness, but you have not seen his heart!"

"Hoppin' tomcats! W'at yer drivin' at? This is all riddles ter me."

The wild man raised his hand.

"Listen, old man of the mountain and plains! Would you find the youth who was with you last night? If you would, then leave your horse here and climb to yonder height. There you will find a path which, if followed, will take you to a spot where you can see your friend in the midst of his companions. Ha! ha!"

Then, like a flash, the wild man of the Hills darted away and disappeared.

For a long time Old Dismal sat still, thinking deeply. Finally he exclaimed:

"I'll do it, by hocus!"

He soon found a place to conceal his horse, and within thirty minutes he had reached the height which the crazy man had indicated. And there, sure enough, he found a narrow path. This he followed for nearly a mile. Suddenly it approached the brink of a small ravine in the depths of which Old Dave heard voices. Cautiously he peered over the verge and what he saw nearly caused him to utter a cry of astonishment.

Below him, lying on the ground in various positions of abandon, were seven masked men whom the ranger at once decided were a part of the band known as the White Vultures. But, it was not the sight of those men that caused the veteran to so nearly betray himself with an exclamation. The form upon which his eyes rested was that of one who was nervously pacing back and forth in the midst of the others. Old Dismal knew that form, knew the very clothes, and when the one upon whom he was gazing lifted his head so that the amazed borderman saw his face and the gold-rimmed nose-glasses, the ranger gasped:

"Dandy, by thunder!"

CHAPTER X.

TWO FEMALES IN TROUBLE.

THE old guide's astonishment was unlimited. He could scarcely believe that he was not dreaming. Grasping a bush close at hand, the old man leaned out and stared down into the ravine. He was so amazed that he scarcely thought of his own exposed condition, and had one of the men below glanced up, he could not have failed to see the incautious ranger.

"Sword o' ole Goliath!" breathed Old Dave. "That's him, my Dandy Pard, sure as shootin'! I can't understand it, nohow. What's he thar fer? His han's are free an' he's at liberty, yet he's with thet gang o' lan'-sharks. Thet's him, nobby clothes, spectacles an' all. By ther hook-nosed Jews! W'at's it mean? He hain't no pris'ner, thet's sart'in," decided Dave. "He's as free as air ter do jest as he pleases. Howlin' tomcats! this gets me!"

Suddenly the ground beneath the old man's feet gave way, and he felt himself falling. The cry of consternation which came from his lips was echoed by one of surprise from the men below. But, he held fast to the bush which he was grasping at the time of the unlooked-for occurrence and so saved himself from going down with the landslide.

As he hung dangling in mid-air, he heard Dandy shout:

"Hold! don't shoot!"

Then, with a desperate surge, the old guide swung himself back to a place of safety. He paused just long enough to cast one look into the little ravine, than he ran swiftly back along the path by which he had reached the spot. He had wondered how that path came there, but understood it now. It was a road used by the Hill's Desperadoes for some purpose. In all probability the retreat of the Vultures was somewhere near the ravine from which he was running.

The old borderman made pretty good time in getting back to the descent at the foot of which he had left his horse. Occasionally he glanced back over his shoulder, more than half-expecting that he would be pursued; but, he was agreeably disappointed by seeing no signs of any one following him.

He found his horse just where he had left him, and was about to ride away when the strange wild man again appeared.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the crazy creature. "You saw him in the midst of his friends! I was there and saw it all, though you could not see me. Of course you could not see me, for how can a human being see air? I was like the air that was around you. I was above you when you came near falling and I saved you, but you did not know it. And you saw him—saw him with his friends! Ha! ha! What color think ye his heart is now?"

Involuntarily the border tramp shrunk from this strange being. A cold chill ran over Old Dismal's body, as he demanded:

"Who and what in the name o' Moses an' ther prophets are you?"

"I have told you. I am a shadow of the night—I am Shadow, the Man from Sundown. That is what some call me, but I am not truly a man. I am a disembodied spirrit, yet at my pleasure I can assume the form of a human being—my present form."

"Waal, what do you know about my little pard, thet's w'at I want ter know."

"Ah-a! What do I know? I know everything—everything! But, do you not know enough?"

"If you know anythin' erbout him, jest spit it rite out. Talk lively an' straight."

"Do you command me? I could tell you much, but you shall know no more. Oh-o! a mortal seeks to command a thing of air! Oh-o! Ha, ha!"

Then once more the wild man sprang away. Old Dismal whipped out a revolver, crying:

"Halt, thar, or by ther gods o' war, I'll putt a bullet through ye!"

The mocking laugh that came floating back was his only answer. The strange creature did not slacken his pace in the least, and soon disappeared amid the rocks and bushes.

"I didn't hev ther heart ter send a lead pill singing past his ear, though I wanted to," Old Dave muttered. "I'm in an ugly mood jest now an' feel like hurtin' sumthin'."

Slowly he rode away from the spot, thinking deeply of the strange things which had occurred within the past few hours. He was sorely puzzled over his latest discovery, and was not at all willing to acknowledge that it was possible the smooth-voiced, eyeglass-dandy was a desperado and a traitor. At the same time he was forced to confess to himself that it looked decidedly bad for the youth whom he had at first taken for a tenderfoot in the fullest sense of the word.

"He fooled us all with his soft ways," muttered the old guide as he rode along. "He seems more like er girl than ennythin' else, but, I have seen ernuff o' him ter know thet he kin fight like chain-lightning let loose. He is er mighty deceptive critter, an' it may be thet he's foolin' us, though I hate ter think so. I kinder got tooken in with him, an' w'en I foun' out w'at kine o' stuff he was made of, I was reddey ter stan' by him through thick an' thin. An' I hain't goin' back onter him now till I know he's crooked."

The old ranger took little heed of the direction that he was moving, for his thoughts were too busy, but, all the time he was keenly on the alert for danger.

"I've got ter turn my 'tention torruds ther gal now," he said aloud. "She must be found sumhow."

Although he had this object in view, he could not keep his thoughts from Dandy and the puzzling discovery that he had made. The incoherent words of the singular wild man also kept running in his head. Was Dandy's heart black, as the strange man's words had seemed to imply?

How long he had been thinking thus, he did not know, but, he was finally aroused by the distant beat of a horse's hoofs.

"Sum one cumin' sure's shootin'!" flashed through the old tramp's head, as he reined his horse into a convenient place of concealment and waited for the unseen rider to approach.

"I'll be prepared ter receive him," he observed, as he drew and cocked one of his revolvers.

But, he did not need the weapon, for the horseman proved to be Frank Fenway. Old Dismal uttered an exclamation of amazement as he recognized the young Easterner.

"Sword o' Goliath! w'at duz thet mean?" he gasped.

Then he rode out and confronted Frank.

"Hold on thar!" he challenged. "W'at's yer rush, an' w'at yer hyer fer, anyhow?"

"Dunston!" cried Frank, "you are the very one I am looking for."

"Waal, you hev foun' me. W'at's ther row?"

"Mrs. Harland has disappeared. When I returned to the cabin, after you left, I found that she was gone, and I have not been able to find her, although I have hunted everywhere that I could."

"Great ginger! thet's tarnal bad! I sh'd say thet you pushed thet hoss, frum ther way he sweats."

"I did, for I remained and searched for the missing lady for a long time after you left. When I decided to follow you, I shoved the horse about as fast as he would travel."

"Waal, it's er piece o' luck thet you foun' me a-tall. I reckon providence must have guided ye hyer."

"I think so too. But we must waste no time if we would find the poor woman."

"Ye'r' right, but it dont never pay ter go off at bafe cock. Jest give me erbout one blessed minute ter think, an' then I'll be with ye."

For a short time the old ranger remained silent, apparently thinking; then he lifted his head, saying:

"Yes, I reckon we'd better look fer ther pore lost woman fu'st, fer she may fall inter ther

han's o' ther red rinos or fall over er cliff if she is left ter wander where she will. I kin hunt up ther gal arter her mother is safe. Cum on."

And, having decided what to do, Old Dismal lost no time in moving. Together the two at once started to return to the cabin within the secluded gulch. For once the veteran's tongue was silent. He had too much to think of just then to do a great amount of talking.

The day's adventures were not over by any means. As they swept round a bend in the valley, they came in full view of a thrilling spectacle.

Two females struggling in the hands of five painted Sioux warriors!

Both Old Dave and the young Easterner uttered cries of surprise, for they recognized one of the unfortunate females.

It was Nina Harland!

CHAPTER XI

IN THE VULTURES' HANDS—FATHER AND SON.

In the excitement caused by Edwin Hollis's declaration that he was pursued by red-skins, Rexford found an opportunity to wheel his horse and get quite a start before his act was noticed.

"Good-by," he muttered. "You will have to hustle if you overtake me now."

Goaded by its master's spurs, the fine horse which he bestrode gave one great bound and then settled down to business. The fugitive horseman heard Dandy cry out to him to halt, but he made no attempt to check his flying horse. Then Dandy's bullets came singing about his ears.

"Fire away," muttered the man from Deadwood. "So long as you fail to come closer than that I will not kick back. You might drop me with a rifle, or possibly with a revolver if you were less excited, but, as it is, I reckon my chance is good."

He was right, for not one of Dandy's bullets touched either him or his horse, although every one whistled uncomfortably close to his ears.

"If what that stranger said about reds is true," thought the fortunate fugitive, "those shots will bring the whole band down on that party, and they will be looking for white folks' scalps I reckon. They had best be moving if they wish to retain their hair back there."

He glanced over his shoulder and uttered a curse as he saw Dandy coming in hot pursuit.

"If death is what you are looking for," he gritted, "you shall be accommodated. If you press me too close, I shall turn, and when I turn, something will drop."

But he soon discovered that he was slowly drawing away from his pursuer. His horse was fresh and full of life, while the one which the spectacled fop rode was in poor condition, having been overtaken within the past few days. When he discovered that he was going to escape his pursuer, Rexford turned and waved his hand in a taunting manner and uttered a yell of derision.

"Come on!" he yelled. "If you are going to travel with me, you will have to stir."

But, Dandy's horse was doing its level best. The youth saw that Rexford was better mounted, yet stubbornly refused to give up the chase.

"Something may happen that will give me a chance to overtake him," muttered the pursuer. "His horse may fall, or may become lame in some way."

But, nothing of the kind occurred, and finally the man from Deadwood was lost to view.

As Rexford galloped along, his thoughts were busy. When he had passed beyond the view of his pursuer, he began to utter his thoughts aloud.

"And so that is her brother! I knew it was the moment I saw him. No, not the moment I saw him, for at first I thought it was her spirit. He is the perfect image of her, and did I not know her dead, I should think that it was she masquerading in male attire. She often spoke of her brother, but I never saw him till we came face to face back there. He is not much taller than she was, if any; and he has her ways, her voice, her eyes, her hair. Gods! It cannot be possible that she is not dead and that it was in truth the girl whom I married and afterwards deserted! The thought sends a cold chill all over me."

He shuddered as he cast a glance over his shoulder. A breath of relief came from his lips as he noted that the pursuer was not in sight.

"Such thoughts are foolish, for I know well enough that she is dead. A person who is dead and buried cannot come to life. I am free of her forever; but her brother is on my trail and I shall have unlimited trouble with him, for he means to kill me. If he follows me to Deadwood, I will dispose of his case, for it is not a difficult thing to find ruffians who will throw him cold if well paid for the work. Let him beware, for Robert Rexford is a terrible bad man to arouse! He shall die within ten hours after he enters Deadwood!"

"I was a fool to become fascinated with the pretty face of that girl, and she was a greater fool to fall in love with such a man as I. She was too good for me, that I will admit. I used her dreadfully mean, but, instead of drowning herself, most any other girl would have applied for a divorce on the grounds of desertion. She was a fool to commit suicide! Any girl is a fool to kill herself for a man. I cannot say that I have not felt some pangs of remorse, but, at the same time, I do not feel that her blood is on my hands. I have stained my hands with blood, but, thank heaven! not the blood of a woman."

"The other—the one who came between us—what of her? Well, I sickened of her after a time, as I did of Leda. She grew tired of me too and we parted. I know not where she is now, nor do I care. It is not best that she ever crosses my path again, for if she rises before me when I am at the height of my prosperity and claims that she is my wife, I shall not hesitate to crush her as I would a snake. The day has past when Robert Rexford would hesitate at anything."

For an hour he galloped onward. Occasionally he would cast a glance over his shoulder, but he saw nothing more of his pursuer. Finally he drew rein and allowed his horse to walk, a respite which the animal greatly needed. His thoughts were still busy, and he rode with his head bowed. Finally he again muttered:

"Perhaps I did wrong in telling Leda that our marriage was a sham. That may have had something to do with her committing suicide. The marriage was really legal, but I reckon she believed me when I told her that it was not. I was angry with her at that time, and made that kind of talk in a malicious mood. The next day I left her, and the next that I heard, she was dead—Ha! what is this?"

He suddenly found himself surrounded by a party of masked men, one of whom had his horse by the bit. Half-a-dozen revolvers were leveled at his head, and a stern voice said:

"Slow and easy, my friend! Don't try any funny business unless you desire to be tapped!"

"Who in Satan's name are you?" demanded the astonished man.

"We are a part of the California Vultures, at your service," was the calm reply.

"Robbers!"

"Well, I suppose some people would call us such, but the name is a little harsh. There is a toll road between Custer and Deadwood and lots of toll-takers. We are not on that road, but we are taking toll just the same."

"Well, you will find me mighty poor picking. I am not fool enough to carry all my wealth around with me in this country."

"Ah! now, is that so? Very well; then I reckon the proper thing will be to hold you for ransom."

In a moment Rexford saw that he had made a mistake and did his best to convince his captors that they would be wasting time if they held him for ransom. But, the Vultures were hard to convince.

"We will hold you till Captain Claw returns, at least," said one who appeared to be leading the party. "He can decide what to do."

"This is a beastly outrage!" stormed the man from Deadwood. "You shall suffer for this, I promise you!"

"You had better spare your threats," came sternly from beneath the mask of the leader. "It will be best for you if you keep a civil tongue in your head. Above all things, do not dare to utter a threat in the presence of Captain Claw."

"Bah!" cried Rexford, scornfully. "I shall tell Captain Claw how much I love him, if he orders me shot the next instant."

"Well, young man, I admire your spirit, but I can't say that I think much of your judgment. Captain Claw is a mighty bad man, as you are liable to discover before you are done dealing with him."

"Where do you propose to take me?"

"For the present we will take you to a snug spot not far from here. When the captain returns, if he decides to hold you for ransom, you will be blindfolded and taken to our secret retreat."

There was nothing else to do, so the captive was forced to submit. His weapons were taken from him and his hands tied behind his back. When this was done, he was escorted to a small pocket within a mile of the place where he was made a prisoner.

"There," said the leader, as he assisted Rexford to dismount, "we shall remain here till the chief appears."

"Which will be about how long? I have business in Deadwood that needs my immediate attention."

"Your business may have to take a rest then, for there is no such a thing as telling when Captain Claw will return. It may be an hour, or it may be twenty-four."

It was less than the shortest period named, for within thirty minutes a masked horseman galloped into the pocket, and he proved to be the Vulture chief. He uttered an exclamation of surprise and satisfaction as soon as his eyes fell upon the prisoner, and springing from his horse, advanced straight toward the unlucky young man.

"Hullo! hullo!" came from beneath the sable mask. "So you ran against my boys after leaving so suddenly with that little dandy at your heels? Well, well! This is better fortune than I anticipated, for I expected to have a hunt for you before I saw you again. How in the world did anything so fortunate happen to occur?"

The leader of Rexford's captors explained with a few words. Captain Claw listened attentively till he had finished, and then said:

"Release his hands and give him his weapons."

Without a word, the man addressed quietly obeyed. Rexford's surprise was unbounded, but he did not hesitate to grasp his handsome revolvers.

"There!" he exclaimed; "I feel like myself again. Captain, permit me to say that you are a gentleman if you do wear a mask."

"There, there! that will do!" laughed Captain Claw. "No taffy in mine! This does not happen every day, I assure you."

"But I am at a loss to understand the meaning of it, as it is."

Quietly the Vulture chief passed his arm through that of the young man from Deadwood, saying in a low tone;

"Come out here a piece where we will not be overheard."

For one instant only did Rexford hesitate, fearing some kind of a trick. But he quickly decided that the desperado leader was not contemplating a crooked move, else why had he been released and given his weapons? Without a word, he suffered himself to be led away.

"Here," said Captain Claw, when they were beyond earshot of his followers, "now we can talk without fear of being overheard."

"That is so, but I cannot imagine what you can wish to say to me."

"I have a revelation to make which will surprise you, Mr. Rexford."

"Mr. Rexford! Pray how do you know my name?"

The Vulture chief laughed again.

"Oh! I know you well," he declared. "I have seen you once before to-day."

"Where?"

"Under the muzzle of a revolver held in the hands of a little fellow who wore glasses."

"Hail I begin to see! You are the one who gave the alarm that reds were coming."

"Exactly."

"And the reds—"

"Were all in my mind."

For several moments Robert Rexford stared at the Vulture captain in a puzzled manner. At last he said:

"There is something strangely familiar about you. I know I have seen you before to-day."

"You have."

"Yet I cannot understand why you gave that false alarm."

"My dear young man, I saw that you were in danger. I thought that, if I created a diversion, you might seize the opportunity to escape. I did so, and you did not disappoint me."

"But you must have had an object in befriending me."

"Sure."

"What object?"

"If you had looked closely at my face when I appeared to-day you would not have to ask that question now."

"Then you think that your face, should I see it, would serve as an explanation?"

"I do."

"Then pray remove the mask."

With a short laugh, the desperado chief complied, and the face of Edwin Hollis was revealed!

"My father!" exclaimed Rexford.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS MAYBLOSSOM SEIZES THE LAST OPPORTUNITY.

It is needless to inform the reader that Nina Harland's companion in trouble was the strange little old maid, Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom. A short distance away stood the little mule, viewing the struggle with eyes which seemed filled with mild surprise. Miss Mayblossom was fighting for all she was worth and the way she kicked and scratched was wonderful to witness. She seemed to have forgotten her pistol.

"Git out of this, you pesky critters!" she screamed, shrilly. "Hain't you got no more decency than to grab two poor unprotected females in this way? I'll scratch the eyes out of your ugly, painted faces, I will! Oh-o-o! Good gracious! You horrid thing! Don't you dare to hug me again in that way! There never no man done that before."

And, to the amazement of the two new arrivals on the scene, the lively little woman knocked the painted warriors right and left, seeming pretty near, if not quite, a match for all of them. Smack, smack went her hard little fists, and down went the reds. When one would grasp Nina, Miss Mayblossom would manage to give him a telling kick or crack with her hand, and he was pretty sure to go to grass. Two or three of the five Indians were down all the time.

"I'll larn ye your places!" snapped the little fury. "It hain't real often that Miss Flora A. Mayblossom gits warmed up, but, when she does, she is a terror on trucks! I only wish there was enough of you critters to keep me real busy. I'm skeered for fear I'll go to sleep while you are crawlin' round me. Take that, and that, and that!"

But aid was at hand whether Miss Mayblossom needed it or not. With wild yells, the two whites charged on the reds. Old Dismal held a revolver in each hand, and when they began to talk the amazed warriors began to fall. Frank drew a revolver, but he did not have to use it, for, in an amazing short time, the old Indian-fighter had dropped all five of the reds.

"Hoppin' tomcats!" yelled the old ranger, flushed with victory. "That's jist w'at I call a delightful leetle scrimmage. We dropped round jist in time, but I must say that I never did see er feemale that c'd handle herself quite so lively as that leetle piece o' calico right thar. W'y, she's jist er holy howler, she is!"

Miss Mayblossom looked offended.

"Please gracious, we didn't need none of *your* resistance!" she snapped. "I never want to feel in debt to a *man*, but I don't know how I am goin' to git out of it when he *will* force his help onto me."

"On! that's all rite," assured Dave, good-naturedly. "I'm proud ter help er feemale, fer I allus did love anythin' in petticoats."

"Oh, you dreadful man!"

Nina Harland had been nearly dead with fright, but she now ran forward, crying:

"Thank Heaven! Old Dismal and Mr. Fenway! We are saved!"

Miss Mayblossom gave a contemptuous sniff.

"I reckon we could took care of ourselves," she nodded.

Frank sprung from the horse and caught Nina in his arms.

"Yes, you are saved," he said. "We came just in time."

"Yas," Old Dave observed, "jest in time, fer if we'd bin enny later, I reckon that thar leetle woman'd licked ther hull crowd o' smoky-skins."

"I can take care of myself," asserted the little woman. "An' it's got to be er mighty smart Irjun that gits ahead of *me*. When I git my mad up I'm awful ugly, an' when I'm awful ugly I'm a pritty good person to keep clear of."

"I believe ye," nodded the old guide. "I'm er reg'lar ole fool over all wimmin in general, but I never saw one as took my eye like you do. If you was a single woman I'd feel like proposin' on ther spot."

"Well, thank goodness, I *am* a single woman. I never did care for a *man*, but I don't know but that was because I never met the right kind of a man. That is, I never have met him subsequent to—to-to to-day."

The manner in which Miss Mayblossom said this was coy and bewitching in the extreme, but if the old ranger took the hint, he did not improve the opportunity just then.

Of course Nina's first question was about her mother, and Frank was forced to avoid telling her the truth, a thing which he did in a most ingenious manner. After a time it was decided to move on to the deserted cabin toward which Frank and the old guide had been traveling. The girl was given a place on the horse behind Frank, and Miss Mayblossom mounted the little mule. Then they started.

Despite all that Old Dismal could say, Miss Mayblossom would talk, and she enlivened the journey by her quaint sayings. When the old ranger tried to frighten her by telling her that she was apt to bring more reds down on them, she replied:

"If you're skeered of them dirty-skinned critters, old man, jist say so. I don't care a hooter for 'em, and if they come, I'll look out that *you* don't git hurt."

That silenced the plainsman.

When the cabin was reached Old Dave drew a breath of relief. He knew from the number of Indians that he had recently seen that the Hills must be full of them, and he had feared an attack. On their way back to the cabin he had done as much as he could under the circumstances toward covering their trail, but he realized that an expert trailer could follow it with little difficulty. As he thought of this, the ranger regretted that he had not concealed the bodies of the five Indians which he had slain, something which he would have done at almost any other time. But, entertained by the queer talk of the eccentric Miss Mayblossom, he forgot other things for the time.

"If you hadn't happened along jist when you did, I'd given them Indians the worst trounsin' they ever had," asserted the little woman, as she proceeded to hitch the mule where it could browse.

"I hain't er doubt o' that," admitted the guide, who was looking after the other horses.

"And it made me so provoked!" Miss Mayblossom went on. "I never like to feel beholden to a *man*, for if there is anything in the world that I alwus shun, it's a man. I can't see what men was made for."

"I reckon they was made for wimmen ter meck fools of. Now I can understan' w'at wimmin was made for."

"Can you, really?" with a touch of sarcasm.

"Well, what was they made for?"

"They was made ter luv'."

For an instant the little woman was speechless, then she broke into a giggling fit.

"Te, he, he!" she laughed. "You're the queerest man I ever saw. Why, you hain't a bit like other men. You are so—so—nice! There! I've said what I never thought I should to no livin' critter of the masculine generation!"

She hung around Dave till he had cared for the horses, and followed close at his heels when he entered the cabin. Frank and Nina were inside, and they both noticed the little woman's singular actions. Old Dismal gave Frank a broad wink, as he asked:

"Do you really think me nice, Miss—Miss—"

"Flora Angelica Mayblossom is my full name, but you may call me Flo or Angie," said the little woman, with a simper. "I alwus allow my *particular* friends to call me either of those names that they choose."

"Then you are ready ter consider me one o' your *particular* frien's, are ye?"

"Well," faltered Miss Mayblossom, "I don't know, but I guess so. You will be the fu'st *man* that ever perspired to that extinction, jist the same."

Dunston grinned slyly.

"My dear," he said, lowering his voice, "are you in—in—"

But here he hesitated.

"My gracious!" gasped the little woman. "He said 'my dear,' and I do believe he is going to ask me if I am in love! What *shall* I do? I mustn't let this chance slip, for I shall never git another."

And then, bestowing a smile on the old man that would have broken the heart of a stone, she asked in a most coquettish manner:

"What is it that you wish to know, sir? Am I in what?"

"I was jist going ter ask if you was in your right mind," grinned the old fraud.

This was a damper for Miss Mayblossom, but she quickly recovered.

"He! he!" she laughed. "Quite a joke, sir! I alwus depreciate anything humorous."

"But it was not a joke," declared the veteran. "I have never joked since I lost my fu'st wife. She was an awful good woman, and I really need—"

"*Another* wife!" shrieked Miss Mayblossom.

"Then take me! I'm yourn till death."

And she flung herself straight into Old Dismal's arms.

CHAPTER XIII.

BESS, THE VULTURE QUEEN.

OLD DISMAL uttered a gasp of amazement, Miss Flora really was in his arms! He was taken completely by surprise. A look of dismay that was ludicrous settled on his face, and, as he supported the limp form of the woman who so detested a *man*, he managed to splutter:

"Howlin' Goliath! Great hoppin' Moses!" And, having got his favorite exclamations thus mixed, he stopped helplessly.

"Oh, you dear, darlin' critter!" panted Miss Mayblossom. "I've bin waitin' for you all my long, weary resistance. I knowed you'd come at last—I *knowed* it! We'll be so happy together, dearest boy! We'll live jist for each other and nobody else, won't we, you delightful, splendid *man*?"

"Gods o' war! hear that!" gasped the tortured man, while great drops of perspiration came out on his face.

"And you'll alwus be so good to your little wifey, won't you, dear?" came from the little woman's lips. "You will buy a little cottage, and you'll git me some new dresses and a bunnit, and you'll keep a team, and we'll have such *delightful* rides, and you'll give me money jist when I want it, and we'll be together alwus, and you'll be so good and join the church."

She paused an instant, and Old Dismal uttered a groan. Then the happy little creature rattled on:

"We'll be the envy of the whole neighborhood where we reside. Everybody'll be sayin' what a nice husband I've got. When we walk out together arm in arm, they'll all look at us, and all the women'll wish they was in my place. I *know* you'll be good to me, dear boy—I *know* it! You'll never let me do any liftin', and you'll bring all the water, and split the kindlin's, and build the fires, and do the washin's, and mind the baby, and—"

But Old Dave waited to hear no more. Uttering a yell of horror, he allowed Miss Mayblossom to fall to the floor, while he bolted through the open doorway and disappeared. The old Hills tramp seemed badly frightened, for he at once took refuge in the nearest place of concealment, and there remained till he saw Frank Fenway leave the cabin, laughing heartily. Making sure that Miss Mayblossom was not following the young man, the now really dismal Dave appeared and beckoned for him to approach. Frank came forward, still laughing.

"Well, old man, you seem to have gotten yourself into a scrape," he observed.

The ranger made a wry face.

"Great ginger!" he exclaimed. "Who'd 'a' thort that old—old—*thing* would have done it that thar way?"

"She saw her chance and jumped for it."

"Waal, she'll hev ter jump further. I hain't in ther matrimonyal market."

"But she declares that she'll hold you to your word."

"But I never gi'n her no word," protested the unhappy man. "I was jist foolin'. I tle her that I had lost my fu'st wife an' was goin' ter say that I was in need o' conserlashun. She thort I was goin' ter say that I needed ernuther wife, an' so she jest flopped rite inter my arms, squ-alin': 'Take me.' That was all there was to it, an' consern her! I hain't goin' ter marry her if I know merself!"

"But she is fearfully enraged and declares that she will sue you for breach of promise."

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!" gasped the ranger. "W'at er 'tarnal scrape I'm in!"

"It looks as if you had put your foot in it, that's a fact. Listen! You can hear her storming within the cabin now."

They were silent and plainly heard Miss Mayblossom's shrill voice declare:

"I'll scald the horrid, mean creter! The idee of a *man*—a mean, good for nothin' *man*—usin' a poor lone woman in such contemptible manner! It's scandalous! Jist wait till I git my fingers in his hair!"

"Ther ole vixen!" gritted Dunston. "W'u'dn't we live happy tergether!"

"She is a perfect tiger-cat," confessed Frank, although he was still laughing. "I should not like to be in your boots, Dave."

The veteran uttered a groan and sat down on a convenient bowlder. And there Frank left him, telling him that he was going for a short walk, as the disappointed Miss Flora had driven him out of the cabin.

Frank's object in going away jist then was to see if he could find any traces of the missing woman, Nina's mother. For some reason, he seemed to feel that she was concealed somewhere not far from the cabin. But, having started, he went further than he intended, knowing that the females were safe with Old Dave till he returned. He finally discovered a place where the left wall of the narrow gulch could be easily scaled, and scarcely knowing why he did so, he resolved to leave the gorge at that place.

"It is not impossible that I may find Mrs. Harland up there," he thought.

But, when he had left the gulch he found nothing of the one for whom he was looking.

The sun was creeping down behind the western peaks when he found himself looking down into a

shallow ravine. He was surprised to hear voices and see two men crouching among the rocks. Listening, he heard one of them say:

"She is sure to come back this way. We can capture her easily, and then we will have that gang which is troubling us so where they will have to come to our terms."

"Yes, curse 'em!" growled the other. "They have bin wuss'n a plague. But we'll have the gal if we have ter shoot her!"

Frank shuddered as he heard those vindictive words.

"We don't want to do that," protested the other. "You can rope her horse and I will have her out of the saddle before she can use those deadly revolvers on us. She is quick on the shoot, but we will get her foul before she can get in her work."

"If we succeed, the cap'n won't let us lose nothin'."

"You bet you're right."

"An ambuscade," thought the man who was peering into the ravine. "They are lying in wait for a woman. I calculate I had better take a hand in the game."

"Hark!" cautioned one of the men below. "I believe I can hear a horse."

He was right, for the faint beat of iron-shod hoofs came to Frank's ears.

"She is coming!" the young Easterner heard the other man say. "Git red-dy fer business."

Frank was able to see both the horse and rider long before the crouching men amid the rocks could catch a glimpse of either. He saw that the rider was indeed a girl. She was urging her horse along as swiftly as possible, evidently wishing to reach some particular spot before dark.

"I believe I will get ready for the fray," thought Frank, as he drew a revolver. "I will open on those fellows just a bit before the moment when they contemplate getting in their work. If I was a good shot, I could make it unpleasantly warm for them, but, it is a sad fact that I cannot hit a barn at twenty paces. I must have a care and not shoot the girl."

On came the unsuspecting young rider, and as she approached, Frank was able to make out that she was quite pretty. Her long dark hair, being unconfined, was floating out behind her as she dashed along. She sat the horse like a Centaur.

Just as the unsuspecting girl reached a point where Frank felt that it would not do to delay longer, he lifted his revolver and fired at one of the crouching figures in the ravine below. Strange to say, he hit the very man that he fired at, and with a yell of pain and amazement, the fellow leaped up. The young Easterner had frustrated the villains' little scheme with a single shot, but, he was determined to make sure of his work, so he leaped to his feet and charged down into the ravine, firing as he came. Without an instant's hesitation both of the baffled schemers fled as if pursued by demons.

A moment later, Frank found himself standing before the dark-eyed, black-haired girl, his smoking revolver still grasped in his right hand. For a short time she seemed too surprised to speak, but she finally seemed to comprehend the situation, for her lips parted in a smile, and she said:

"I am in your debt, sir. Evidently those gentlemen were waiting for me."

"That voice—that face! When before had he heard the voice? When had he seen the face? Bowing gracefully, hat in hand, he replied:

"I was fortunate to be of service to you. I heard their plot to make you a captive, and so I took a hand."

"I fancy their plot would have succeeded hadn't you been around. Allow me to thank you."

She held out her hand frankly, and he made haste to grasp it. Their eyes met for an instant, and a thrill ran over the young Easterner. A blush colored the girl's cheeks for an instant, then she became very white, as she quickly withdrew her hand.

"I must go on," she said. "Night is at hand."

"You are not going without telling me your name?"

Her lips parted in a hard, mirthless laugh.

"It is better that you do not know my name. I do not want you to think too bad of me."

"I ask it as a favor," persisted Frank, as she seemed about to ride away. "Surely you can not refuse under the circumstances."

She looked at him a moment in silence, and then she said:

"What matters it whether you think well of me or not. We may never meet again. You wish to know me. I am Bess, Queen of the Vultures!"

Then she struck her horse a sharp cut with the whip, waved the astounded young man an adieu, and galloped away along the ravine.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD DISMAL INTERFERES—DANDY ON HAND.

DARKNESS had already settled over the Hills when Frank returned to the little cabin in the secluded gulch. Old Dave was watching for him, and quite naturally, was somewhat alarmed over his protracted absence.

"Whar in ther name o' sin hov ye bin?" asked the old nomad. "If 'tadn't bin fer leavin' them females without enny protector, I'd 'a' bin lookin' arter ye afore this. Hyer I've bin ever since you went away, an' I hain't dared ter look inter ther cabin or go s'arch fer you."

When Frank had told of his adventures, the plainsman observed:

"I've heerd tell o' thet gal, but I never saw her. You say thet she made you think o' sum one thet was with ther train. Who?"

"The little spectacled dandy who was with you this

morning. Why, the girl looked enough like him to be his own sister! Her voice sounded like his."

"Is thet so?" gasped Dismal, and he looked decidedly dazed, but Frank could not see his face in the darkness.

It seemed for the old borderman that his last hope for his Dandy Pard was being shattered. Report said that the sister of Captain Claw was Queen of the Vultures. Frank said that the self-confessed Queen of the lawless marauders looked enough like Dandy to be his sister. Old Dave, himself, had seen his little pard in the midst of a band of masked men. There seemed nothing for it but to believe that Dandy was a traitor and therefore chief of the Vultures.

But Dunston was not ready to confess that he had been deceived, so he said nothing of his suspicions. He simply shook his head and protested that he could not understand it. Frank saw that the ranger was sorely puzzled, and he decided to give the old man time to think it over. The young Easterner had also heard that the sister of the Vulture chief was Queen of the band, and while returning to the cabin after the adventure in the shallow ravine, he had reasoned out the connection between the girl whom he had so recently served and the youth who had been with the train.

For some time Old Dismal was silent. Finally he said:

"Waal, now thet you are back ter look out fer ther females, I reckon I'll take a cruise. I may find the missing lady, or perhaps I'll run onto Dandy. Mebbe he can meck everything clear. I hain't dared ter peek inter ther cabin but once, fer fear thet thet pesky ole woman w'd git holt o' me erg'in. W'en I looked in, Miss Nina was sleepin', an' thet other was watchin' her. Perhaps she'll let you inter ther cabin."

"Oh! I don't imagine there will be any trouble about that."

"Waal, ye want ter keep er sharp watch thet ye hain't s'prised by ther tarnal red varmints ter-nite. I'll be back by mornin', an' most probbly afore thet."

A few moments later Frank entered the cabin, and Old Dave rode away.

Darkness had shrouded the Hills for the space of two hours or more when the borderman came in full view of a startling spectacle. The light of a large fire revealed a band of masked men gathered under a tree, and in their midst with a rope around his neck stood one whom Old Dave recognized.

It was the strange wild man who called himself Shadow!

The end of the rope, which had been flung over a limb, was in the hands of three or four of the masked desperadoes, who seemed to be waiting the signal to pull. In front of the apparently doomed man stood the form of one who was evidently the leader of the sable masks. He was speaking:

"Old man, your minutes are numbered. You call yourself Shadow, the Man from Sundown, and you have followed me like a veritable shadow, but at last I have you within my power. You cannot escape, and now I will finish the work which I failed to do in California some years ago."

A meaningless laugh broke from the lips of the imperiled man.

"You will finish the work, will you? Ha, ha! Go on! You have already killed my body, but you cannot kill my spirit! You will hang what appears to be a man, but to-morrow his spirit shall be with you. You hung a man in California. He hung by the neck till he was dead, but his spirit took the trail of vengeance, and has followed you ever since. You think that you will dispose of the avenger now, but you will fail—you will fail!"

"Bah! That is nonsense! I know not how you escaped in California, but I do know that you have proven a thorn in my flesh long enough. This time you cannot escape."

"You think so, but you will change your mind. Oh, yes! you will change your mind. Your minutes are numbered, you vile monster! Never again shall you see the sun rise over the eastern hills if you go on with your ungodly work! Death shall overtake you like a thief, and to-morrow your corpse shall make food for the vultures!"

The one addressed shrank back before the wild man with the noose about his neck. Then a harsh laugh broke from the lips concealed by the mask, and the man cried:

"You cannot frighten me in that way! I will silence you forever! Up with him, lads!"

The masked desperadoes did not hesitate to obey this command, and Shadow was hoisted off his feet. But just then Old Dismal took a hand. With a shout, he galloped into the midst of the men beneath the gallows tree, a knife flashed in the light from the bonfire, and the rope was severed, allowing the Man from Sundown to fall upon his feet.

"Howlin' tomen's!" yelled the old ranger as he faced the gang of masks, a revolver in each hand. "Hyer we are on hand like a thumb! We are alwus roun' at sech leetle matinees as this, an' we usually step rite inter ther ring as big as life an' twice as nat'ral. If there's goin' ter be enny fun hyer, I'd kinder like a slice o' it."

The masked villains shrunk back beneath the muzzles of those deadly long-barreled revolvers. The light from the dancing fire revealed a thrilling spectacle. One man cowering more than half a dozen!

"Furies!" snarled the leader of the baffled lynchers. "Who is this?"

"Waal, neow," drawled the daring old tramp, "jest you butt erg'in him an' you'll think as how you've struck a double-an'-twisted dismal disaster. I jest drapped in ter muse ther congregashun, an' w'en I'm musin', I'm awful funny."

"You old fool!" hissed the masked chief. "Your life shall pay for this!"

"Oh, now, git out! My life hain't settlin' my bills now. 'Sides thet, I've got my life insured, so 'tain't best you go ter monkeyin' with thet."

The desperado leader swore roundly.

"Now don't do thet," entreated the veteran. "It alwus gives me ther earache ter hear er man tork like thet."

"You will get something worse than the earache before you get away from here," asserted the mask.

"We will give you the neckache with a piece of rope. That will cure you of your desire to stick your nose into other folks's business. Close in on him, boys!"

"Now, if you wish to keep the cold night-air from blowing through bullet-holes in your systems, jest you keep rite whar you be. I shell perforate ther fu'st one thet moves!"

His words had a cold, deadly ring that plainly indicated that he meant business. The lynchers hesitated. Not one of them had a desire to meet sudden death.

"Do you hear?" howled the enraged leader. "Jump for him all at a time! Don't give him a show, for if—"

"Fer if you don't shet up, your frien's will hear suthin' drap har," interrupted Dismal. "We have heard quite ernuff frum you. Jest give sumbuddy else a chance ter tork. I'm quite a han' ter work my mouth myself. Now, have a care, an' preserve yer good health."

The old man did not seem in the least alarmed at the peril of his position. In fact he did not seem aware that he was in any peril.

It is difficult to tell just how the affair would have terminated had there not come a sudden interruption. Several yells, a rattle of revolver-shots and a clatter of hoofs that seemed to indicate that a band of horsemen were at hand. Two of the masked men were hit, when, seized by a sudden terror, the entire band fled into the darkness.

Then Dandy appeared, a smoking revolver in each hand!

CHAPTER XV.

FRANK MAKES A DISCOVERY.

LIKE a flash, out of the darkness into the circle of light made by the fire came the little spectacled top. The bridle-rein hung loose on the neck of the horse which he bestrode, and the revolvers in his hands told who had fired the shots which had sent disaster and death into the ruffianly band. Evidently the masked men had thought themselves attacked by a large party.

Like a flash, Dandy came out of the darkness, swept past the gallows-tree and disappeared into the blackness beyond. Old Dave shouted for him to stop, but the retreating hoof-beats of his horse told that he either did not hear or did not wish to heed the cry.

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!" gasped the astonished old borderman; "thet feller's er perfect leetle cyclone. W'y, it scounded like hafe er hundred hosses an' riders was cumin' jest afore he got here. He kin yell an' shoot ter beat ther Dutch."

But the man of the Hills was not in the habit of losing much time in wondering over anything, so he turned to the man who had been suspended from the tree limb, saying:

"How are ye, ole galoot? Tied up? Northin' but yer han's, eh? Waal, thar ye are, free! Now skip up behind me on Ole Lightfoot hyer, an' we'll proceed ter meck ourselves skeerce afore them cusses with smutty faces git back to their mutton."

Although he still seemed somewhat dazed, the man did not hesitate to obey. As he sprung up behind the ranger, a revolver cracked somewhere in the darkness and a bullet came singing past their ears.

"Great ginger!" gasped Dismal. "They are cumin' fer us! It will be mighty warm in this vicinity afore shortly. I reckon we'd better be peggin'. Skoot, Lightnin', skoot!"

And as a wild yell pealed from the borderman's lips, the horse and its double burden vanished into the darkness. Up before the flying animal rose a black form, then came a flash, and the report of a pistol echoed through the night. Old Dismal felt the wind from the bullet as it sped past his head. An instant later one of the daring old fellow's long revolvers spoke and down went the dark form. On through the blackness galloped the horse, bearing its double burden.

"If they don't want ter run erg'in' snare, they want ter keep out o' Old Dismal's track! I am in an ugly state o' mind jest erbout now. I'm wusser ter tackle than an eppydemic."

But, not another form appeared before them, and they left the lynchers' tree and the bonfire far behind. Finally Old Dave drew rein. At the same moment Shadow slid from the horse and stood beside the animal.

"Well, Ole Shadder," remarked the borderman, "you are out of that fix, an' you may call yerself lucky, fer you was in mighty snug quarters. I reckon I got round jest in time ter save you, and Dandy got round just in time to save us both."

"Yes," answered the stranger slowly, "you came just in time. He meant to silence the avenger forever that time, but his plans were shattered again. I have much to thank you for."

The ranger was amazed, for the man who had seemed so crazy before, now spoke like a sane man. There was none of the wild ring to his voice and he did not laugh in that blood-chilling manner.

"I'm glad ter hev bin o' service ter ye," the veteran assured. "I allus hate like p'izen enny galoot as hides his face beneath a mask, an' nothing does me more good than to buck erg'in' 'em. W'en

I git er chance, I allus shove my oar rite inter enny leetle 'fair like this hyer one ter-nite. It allus refreshes me ter hev er han' in sech jamborees."

"The time may come when I shall be able to square the debt which I owe you, sir."

"Oh, don't think o' that! That's all rite! It was fun fer me."

"But you put your life in peril just the same."

"Oh! I reckon there was er leetle danger, but, thet don't count. I saw er feller-critter in danger o' losein' his breathe, an' so I jest hopped rite inter ther circle. If Dandy hadn't cum ter help us out, I reckon I'd had ter licked ther hull measly gang."

"Dandy, Dandy! Who is he?"

"My leetle pard as you was tellin' had sech er black heart. No matter how black his heart may be, ther blood o' er white man flows in his veins, an' he giv us er mighty good lift ter-nite."

The strange man put his hand to his head in a troubled manner and was silent for a few moments. Then he said slowly:

"Was that the one? I do not understand. I have seen him with the men whom I thought were Vultures. Sometimes he is a young man, sometimes he is a girl. I do not understand."

"Then you are sure that he is not the Vulture chief?"

"No, no! He is not the chief! I know the chief—oh, yes! I know him! He knows me, an' before long he shall feel my power. I know him! Ha! ha! I know him!"

This sudden change increased Old Dismal's amazement. Once more the strange man was as wild as ever. His voice was filled with a terrible ring and his laugh was hollow and blood-chilling. He was the crazy man again.

"If you know him, who is he?" asked the guide, hoping to learn from Shadow the name of the Vulture captain.

"Who is he? Ah! I cannot remember *who* he is, but I know him just the same. I cannot tell his name—it has gone from me. But I know him—I know him!"

Suddenly the wild man whirled and seemed to be listening.

"Hush!" he whispered, hoarsely. "I can hear him coming this way. He is all alone! He is coming—coming—coming to death! I must go and meet him. The hour of vengeance has come! Ha! ha! ha!"

Swift as thought he sprang away and vanished in the night.

For a long time Old Dave Dunston sat looking toward the spot where the strange being had disappeared. Whatever the old man's thoughts were, he did not express them aloud, but finally he rode onward.

"Dandy went this way," he said. "I will follow, for it is the way to the cabin in ther gulch."

But he saw nothing of his litle pard until the cabin was reached. There was a light within the old hut, and Dismal made haste to care for his horse and enter, forgetting for the time that his dread Miss Mayblossom was within. Great was his surprise to see, by the light from the open fire, that Dandy had reached the cabin ahead of him and was talking with Nina. The youth uttered an exclamation of delight as he saw the old guide enter.

"Hello, Dismal, Old Pard!" he exclaimed, as he came forward with his hand outstretched.

The ranger did not hesitate to grasp the small, soft hand.

"I'm jest 'tarnal glad ter see ye, leetle pard," came from the veteran's lips, as he wrung the youth's hand. "I didn't know as I'd ever git er chance ter shake with ye erg'in!"

"I have not deserted my friends by any means," laughed Dandy.

"I'm erware o' thet since er short time ergo. Leetle pard, you did scatt'r them p'izen critters with bidden faces in a most salubrious manner. You said in jest in time ter help us out o' er 'tarnal tuff scrape; but w'y in ther name o' sin didn't you stop w'en I hollered?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't know you till then, and I calculated it would not be safe around there to palaver, so I kept right on."

"Waal, I don't kalkerlate it was enny too safe er lokality. I follered pretty clost at yer heels with thet galoot they was goin' ter hang."

"Did you happen to be in such a scrape, old man? I saw the gang surrounding two men who were under the tree, one of whom was mounted. From the aspect of things, I calculated that the two men were in danger, and so I pitched in."

"An' made er reg'lar scatterin' 'mong ther dry bones. You are er perfec' whirlwind, Dandy."

"No taffy, if you please!" laughed the little fop.

In his quaint way, Old Dave explained how he came to be in such an unpleasant situation. He and Dandy talked together for some time, but the old man made no mention of his suspicions. Indeed, in the youth's presence, he quite forgot that he had ever harbored any suspicions that his pard was not just what he professed to be.

Frank Fenway watched the two closely, but his eyes were fastened on Dandy's face the most of the time. There seemed to be something about the youth's countenance that fascinated the Easterner.

Finally Dandy turned away from Old Dismal and went back to Nina. As soon as Frank could catch the old guide's eye, he made a covert motion and left the cabin. The guide followed shortly after and the two met out in the darkness.

"Waal, Frank, w'at is it?"

"I have made a discovery, Dave!"

"Is thet so?"

"Yes, and a startling one, to say the least."

"W'at is it?"

"I fancy you will be amazed when I tell you. It

nearly took away my breath when I first thought of it. You know that we were speaking about the possibility of Dandy being Captain Claw?"

"Yes."

"I am satisfied that we were right."

"An' I'm satisfied thet we was clean 'way off."

"Why do you think so?"

Dunston related his adventures since leaving the cabin, concluding with:

"If Dandy is er villain, w'at fer did he sail in an' shoot two o' ther masked galoots? I reckon thet they must 'a' bin a part o' ther gang o' Vultures."

"They could not have been, for I am certain that Dandy is Captain Claw."

"Hev ye enny new proof?"

"My discovery."

"An' thet is?"

"Simply this: *Dandy is a girl!*"

"W'at?" almost shouted the astounded old ranger.

"Dandy is a girl," repeated Frank; "and that girl is Bess, Queen of the Vultures!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DANDY DISAPPEARS.

OLD DAVE was amazed.

"Boyee, you're crazy as er bed-bug!" he gasped. Frank laughed.

"Not a bit, old man. I knew that you would think me daft; but, I am certain that I have hit upon the truth."

"W'y, how do ye know? Hev ye enny proof?"

"I don't need any. It is proof enough to see the two, for they look exactly alike. Oh! there is no doubt about it. Dandy is playing a double part."

But Old Dismal shook his head.

"You'll never meck me believe it in thet way. They might look jest erlike an' be brother an' sister."

"But the voice of Dandy is the voice of the girl who called herself Queen of the Vultures."

"Thet might be."

"Now look here, Dunston, it is plain that you are not going to be easily convinced, but I think that you will acknowledge one thing."

"W'at's thet?"

"That is, that Dandy seems very much like a girl."

"Waal," drawled the stubborn old fellow, "thet hain't no proof."

"I should say that it is very good proof. Think of his small hands and feet, his soft voice and quiet ways. It seems strange to me that we never suspected him before. I tell you, Dave, Dandy is a girl."

But the ranger was still obstinate.

"There hain't no gal livin' as kin fight ther way I've seen thet leetle cuss," he asserted. "W'y, tenderfoot, he's er perfec' tornader!"

"Girls can fight, sometimes."

"Yes, I know thet. Fer instance, thet's Calamity Jane. Thet feemal w'ars breeches an' kin fight her way ennywhar; but, you can't meck me believe thet Dandy is no second edishun o' Calamity Jane. I tell you, my leetle pard is er man."

"If so, it is all the worse for him, for, in that case he must be Captain Claw, the Vulture chief himself."

"Pr'aps so, but I'm jest er leetle puzzled 'bout them ther Vultures."

"How is that?"

"Waal, thet seems ter be two ban's o' 'em, an' one ban' seems ter be buckin' erg'in ther other."

"Well?"

"Ter which ban' does ther genuine Cap'n Claw belong? Thet's the question."

"What difference does that make?"

"Considerable. One o' them ban's is not so very bad an' may really be a sor. of vigerlance orgernization w'at is tryin' ter wipe out ther ginuwine lan' pirates."

"You may be right, but it seems very singular that a party of law-servers should take the name of a gang of outlaws in the manner that it would appear that one of these parties have done."

"It is jest er bit queer, I'll hev ter admit, but I reckon thet's jest erbout ther way it is."

"And you think that Dandy may be the leader of the Vigilantes?"

"Waal, I figger it thet way. I hev seen sum things w'at I hain't tole enny one erbout. I believe ther lad's white."

"If Dandy is a man, he may be square, but I doubt it. If he is a man, he has been deceiving us in a way that looks anything but white. He joined the train as being from the East."

"An' I dunno but he is. It's an almighty perplexin' 'fair ennyhow. Ghost o' old Goliath! I wish I c'd see bottom!"

"I wish the same thing. I feel as if we were in constant peril while we remain here and that peril was increasing."

"You hain't fur from right. I'll allow; but, w'at's ter be dun? If ther pore woman, Nina's mother, was here, we'd start fer Custer or Deadwood. But, she hain't hyer."

"She must be found!"

"Ye're right, boyee, she must be foun'. If thar was only sum one ter take ther rest o' you through ther neares' camp, I'd stay behin' an' hunt fer her; but as it is, we've all got ter stay till she's foun'."

"Yes, and every minute that her mother's fate is obscured by uncertainty Nina grows more and more restless and excited. It is difficult for the poor girl to remain quiet for a moment. She slept a part of the time while you were away, but several times she awoke calling to her mother."

Old Dave bowed his head and remained silent for

several moments. Finally he flung out one hand with a muttered imprecation:

"Howlin' tomcats!" he snapped. "That is w'at I call er gittin' in er tarnal scrape!"

"One which we shall be fortunate to get out of."

"Waal, I dunno I've bin in wuss ones, an' I al-lus kem out right side up with care. I've bin through trials, tribblylshuns an' disasters o' all kinds, yet hyer I am. Ter be shore, I'm not w'at I uster was, but then, I'm er pritty good man now."

To which Frank assented.

"I fancied that our trials were pretty well over when we entered the Hills," said the young Easterner; "but it seems that they had only begun."

"If ther reds don't stumble onto us, we'll most problikely git through all right. But if they git arter us, ther Ole Boy'll be ter pay. I reckon ther Hills are pritty full o' 'em."

"But I fear the outlaws more than the reds."

"Thet's beca'se you don't know ther measly red rinos. I'd rayther git hafe er dozen o' ther lan' pirates arter me than one o' ther red imps, although I hain't ever had much trouble in lickin' sevarial times my weight in Injuns."

"Well, we must depend on Providence."

"Great ginger! If thet was all we had ter depen' on, I reckon we might git inter er wuss fix than we are now. We'd better depen' on ourselves."

"But, what are we to do about Dandy?"

"Do? W'y, we hain't goin' ter do northin'!"

"You have more faith in him than I have," confessed Frank.

"I tell ye, lad, we'll never git inter enny trouble through him. Don't you worry."

"I wish I was as sure."

The old guide and the young man returned to the cabin. When they opened the door both were surprised to see Dandy and Miss Mayblossom talking together in one corner. The youth and the queer little old maid appeared to be decidedly startled at their sudden entrance, and Frank fancied that Miss Flora looked confused. Dandy arose quickly and moved toward the place where Nina was sitting.

"Did you see that, Dave?" asked the young Easterner, in a low tone.

"My two eyes are wide open tight," was the reply.

"What do you think?"

"I dunno."

"Well, I'll tell you what I think. I believe that that singular woman is an accomplice of this person whom we call Dandy!"

"It *did* look like there was an understandin' atween them," confessed the old ranger. "By ther holy poker! I reckon that thar feemal's er hombly old fraud! Consarn all this mix, says I!"

And Frank shared his belief.

Dandy halted beside Nina, saying:

"Cheer up, Miss Harland. I am sure that everything will end well."

But, Nina's face lost little of its sadness.

"You are kind to try to encourage me," she said; "but I cannot be cheerful while mother's fate is so wrapped in uncertainty. If I only knew where she is!"

"I am confident that you will be re-united soon. She is probably searching for you."

"And in danger, while I am safe."

"We are all in more or less danger. The Hills are swarming with hostiles."

"Yes, I know. Miss Mayblossom and I were attacked by a party of them. She fought like a real heroine, but I fear they would have overpowered us had not brave Old Dave and Mr. Fenway appeared and dispatched them."

"Yes, I learned of that from Miss Mayblossom," smiled Dandy. "She said that Mr. Fenway took quite a prominent part in the rescue. He did the shouting, while Old Dismal dispatched the redskins."

"Now it is not right for you to speak of him in that way," protested the girl, a little slightly offended. "You have never been of as much service as *that* to me."

"It is because I have never been fortunate enough to have had the chance," declared Dandy, as he bent over her. "I am ready to do anything for you."

"Anything?"

"Yes, *anything!*"

"Then find my mother and bring us together!"

"How will you reward me?"

"There, that is like a *man!* You said you were ready to do anything for me, but when I ask you to do something, you want a reward for the service."

"You should be willing to reward me for doing so great a service."

"I am," she murmured. "If you will find mother and bring us together, I will reward you."

"How?"

"You shall have a penny," and the girl laughed for the first time. "There, sir, isn't that sufficient?"

Dandy could not help joining in the laugh.

"The inducement is *very* tempting," he admitted.

"I promise you I will do everything in my power to find her, and, having friends near, I hope to be successful."

"Having friends near?" echoed the girl. "Who are they—Old Dave and Mr. Fenway?"

"No, there are others of whom you know nothing. With their assistance, there will be little chance of failure if your mother is living."

"But I do not understand how you can have other friends than Mr. Fenway and the guide. Who are they?"

Before he could answer, the door swung open and Mrs. Harland, herself, stepped into the room!

Then there was a scene indescribable.

After which it was discovered that Dandy had disappeared!

CHAPTER XVII.

PHANTOMS OF THE GLOOM.

A BLACK shadow in the darkness—a phantom-like figure that steals like a grim ghost through the gloom.

Silence over the Hills—a silence broken only by the harsh cry of some night bird or the mournful howl of a wolf.

The shadow pauses and looks back through the blackness. It assumes a listening attitude. Only the spirit-like whisper of the wind amid the rocks and pines is to be heard.

After a time the shadow moves onward again. In a moment it seems to be swallowed up, or to melt away, in the darkness.

What is that?

Another shadow that steals silently through the gloom. It seems to be following the first figure. Its footfalls are like the dropping of forest leaves. Onward it glides and vanishes as the first had done.

The wind amid the pines seems to be whispering of some terrible thing. Now it moans faintly like the sobbing of a tired child. There is something blood-chilling about the sound.

What are these phantoms of the night?

Listen!

"I cannot understand this strange terror that is upon me. My heart thrills with an unknown fear and my blood seems like ice water in my veins. I am no craven, yet to-night I tremble with terror and shrink from the darkness which surrounds me. What ails me?"

It is the first shadow that seems to be speaking. It has halted and is trying to peer back through the darkness again.

"It seems that I am followed, but I can see or hear nothing. I fancy that there is some one close behind me, but when I turn, there is nothing but this cursed darkness. Why did I start to visit the hidden treasure—the spoils of my lawless deeds—to-night? Another time would have done as well.

"Ah! What was that?"

For several moments the silence is only broken by what sounds like the short, panting breathing of a terrified human being. Then once more the wind moans amid the pines and the wolf howls far away.

"It was nothing. I am a fool to be frightened at my own shadow. More than a score of times have I faced death and not quailed, and now I am terrified by the gloom of a summer night. I am ashamed of myself. Miles Rexford, you are losing your nerve.

"And yet I know that there is an avenger on my trail. The man whom the Vultures hanged in California because he would not tell where his gold was secreted still lives and has proved a perfect Nemesis. He is crazy, but none the less dangerous for that reason. It seems an impossibility to kill him. He knows me as Captain Claw, but when I have given up this wild life and begun the world anew in another land, Miles Rexford cannot be connected with the lawless chief of the California Vultures. There are better days ahead.

"Fate seems to have taken a sudden turn against me just now, but the tide cannot always run in one direction. If it was not for that cursed gang which has stolen our name, and which seems determined to destroy us all, we might reap a rich harvest here in the Hills, and scatter to the four quarters of the earth before the Government could lay its hands upon us. As it is, I fear that we shall have to disband or be destroyed.

"But I have wealth enough even if we have to disband to-morrow. It is safely concealed, and none of the band know that I have it. I am going to see that it has not been disturbed. Ha! ha! With the savings of my lawless career, I can live like a prince and have everything that the heart can ask for.

"Stop! Did I say everything? I was wrong, for all my wealth will not buy me the true love of a true woman. I have seen one whom I could worship. I stole her from her mother's side, but fate, aided by the band that has stolen our name, snatched her away from me. I have lost her, I fear.

"But why am I standing here? I will go on again."

Once more the shadow steals onward. It little dreams how close it is followed by a second shadow!

Again the night wind whispers in a ghostly way, and it prophesies of a terrible tragedy that is soon to occur. The night bird awing in the gloom shrieks out as if in sudden terror and plunges onward into the blackness.

Finally the shadow pauses again, and this time it is on the very brink of a precipice. Hidden by the darkness far, far down are the terrible rocks.

"Ugh! That would not be a good place to take a tumble, I fancy. The darkness hides the rocks, but they are there."

"Yes, they are there, Captain Claw!"

A shriek of terror, and the first shadow finds itself in the grasp of the phantom-like pursuer. But, there is nothing ghostly about the iron grip which holds the dark figure suspended on the verge of the black gulf.

"Great God!" groans the helpless victim that is to be. "The avenger!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

A wild laugh—the blood-curdling laugh of a madman!

"Yes, the avenger, Captain Claw! I have been long on your track, and my hour has come at last. You hanged a man years ago, in California! From that moment you were doomed! The spirit of the dead man has pursued you! To night you tried to hang the ghost of the man whom you killed years

ago! He told you then that you would not live to see the sun rise again. He spoke the truth!"

"My God!" gasps the voice of him who is held over the chasm. "It is useless to plead with a madman!"

"Yes, it is useless. You are doomed! But, when you go down, you will be locked fast in my arms. I shall bear you down swiftly and dash you on the rocks. Then I will sit beside your body and laugh. Ha! ha! I shall laugh! Captain Claw, your time has come! Bid good-by to life!"

With a wild cry, the imperiled one struggles frantically. Again that mad laugh is heard, and then, with the poor wretch clasped in his arms, the madman leaps out into the darkness!

One last wild shriek comes up out of the gulf; then all is still!

The hoof-beats of a galloping horse echo through the darkness. The animal is traveling at a mad pace toward the northwest, and there is a rider on its back, who is constantly urging it on with voice and spur.

"I would give a hundred dollars if I was in Dead-wood at this minute," declares the rider. "The Hills are full of reds, but I feel little fear of them. At the same time, I know that I am not safe. I have been thinking how much that young man who pretended to be Leda's brother looked like Leda herself, and I have more than half decided that it was not a young man, but was Leda, whom I have supposed dead. I am almost sure that I am right. How she escaped death I cannot tell, but I believe that was she. If I am right, then she is on my trail, and she means to finish my career. I must look sharp."

On through the night goes the galloping horse. With an anxious eye, the rider glances up toward the sky.

"A dark night, thank fortune!" he says. "There will be a moon later, but I fancy that the sky will be overcast with clouds. So much the better for me. I scarcely believe that there can be much danger from this strange band of whom father told me. They will not know of my movements."

"How singular it was that after so many years father and I should meet as we did. He said that I am a chip from the old block, and I believe him. He is now an outlaw—the leader of the dreaded California Vultures. I cannot say that I have a father to be proud of."

"But, it is very strange that another band of men should take the same name and still be fighting against those whom father leads. I cannot understand it at all. He said that the other band has a beautiful queen—a girl not far from Leda's age, according to his tell. Something tells me that it is her own self. If so, she is surely looking for me."

"Ha! what's that?"

A dark form springs up before the horse and seizes the animal by the bit. The rider jerks out a revolver, but he does not use it. Several other dark forms appear, and a voice cries:

"Robert Rexford, you are wanted!"

Then he is seized and dragged from the horse. In the struggle which follows the revolver is discharged. The horse breaks away from the man who is holding him, and, riderless, goes galloping madly on to the northwest.

Then the dark shadows and their prisoner seem to melt away and vanish in the gloom.

Darkness and silence over the Hills.

Dandy was gone!

This discovery created no little surprise and consternation among the inmates of the cabin in the secluded gulch. Old Dismal and Frank Fenway gazed into each other's eyes and read the thoughts which had not then been expressed in words. Locked in each other's arms, filled with the great joy of their reunion, mother and daughter were not so conscious of the consternation that the sudden disappearance had created as they would have been at another time. Miss Mayblossom flew round like a person deranged, shaking her white apron excitedly, and laughing and crying in a breath.

Old Dave called Frank aside.

"What do ye think about it, tenderfoot?" asked the guide.

"I think that we had better get out of this as fast as the Lord will let us," was the reply.

"I dunno but you're right," admitted the ranger.

"It is the best thing that we can do. This sudden disappearance looks mighty suspicious."

"It duz look er leetle quare. I can't jest understand it."

"If he is all straight, what did he leave us so suddenly for?"

Dismal shook his head.

"That's er conundrum."

"We are all together, and now is the time to make a move. By to-morrow or sooner we may be found here by our foes, red or white."

"That's er fac'. I believe you're right. You git ther feemales redly an' I'll hev ther horses on ther spot. By sunup we kin be er good long piece frum hyer."

In a remarkably brief space of time, the party was ready to move. With a feeling of satisfaction, they bade good-by to the old cabin. As there were not enough horses by one, Nina rode behind Frank. Away through the night they followed the veteran guide, who, for once in his life, was grim and taciturn.

Suddenly Old Dismal draws rein. They are many miles from the little cabin in the gulch.

"Seems ter me jest like I smell smoke," whispers the old Hills pilot.

"I believe I can, too," says Frank.

The guide slips from his horse.

"Jest you stay here w'ile I go ter investigate." Then he glides forward and disappears in the gloom.

It is nearly time for the moon to rise, but the sky is overcast. There will be little moonlight wasted on the Black Hills country to night.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes pass, but Old Dismal does not return.

"I hear voices!"

It is Miss Mayblossom who makes this declaration. The others listen and fancy that they can hear voices, too.

"I'm goin' ter see what it is," declared the little woman; and before any one can prevent, she has dismounted from the mule and disappeared in the darkness.

In a few moments she returns.

"Come with me!" she cries, in an excited whisper. "I have so'ething to show you."

They follow her, and a few minutes later find themselves looking down into a little valley where the light of two large fires reveals a thrilling spectacle.

A band of masked men are standing with revolvers in their hands. They form two dark lines, at either end of which, twenty paces apart, stand two persons who are facing each other with dueling pistols in their hands. One of the duelists is Robert Rexford. The other is Bess, the Vulture Queen!

The girl is speaking, and her voice is clear and distinct.

"Robert Rexford, your hour has come! I have hunted you down at last. I thought you were the chief of the California Vultures, and I organized this band for the purpose of destroying you and your followers. At last I have learned my mistake. It is your father, not you, who is the true Captain Claw! But I have you, villain that you are, in my power, and you shall die."

"Go on with your fun," comes harshly from Rexford's lips. "I warn you that I am a dead shot, and I shall shoot to kill. This will put you out of the way forever."

"If I die, you die also. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Manton, give the signal."

One of the masks steps forward and says:

"All ready! One, two—"

But before the fatal "three" can be uttered, a rifle-shot rings out, and Robert Rexford drops dead, a bullet in his brain!

CHAPTER XVIII.

REVELATIONS—CONCLUSION.

WITH a shriek, the Vulture Queen rushed to the side of the fallen man, and dropped on her knees.

"He is dead," she screamed, and in an instant the dueling pistol was at her own head, but like a flash a lithe figure bounded forward and snatched the weapon from her hand, crying:

"Leda, you are mad!"

It was Dandy!

"Walter!" gasped the girl, and then fainted in his arms.

The band of masked men gathered around them, but suddenly another figure broke through the circle and paused, gazing into the face of the dead duelist.

"He is dead," said the new-comer, slowly—"dead! Father and son are both dead."

It was the crazy man of the Hills who called himself "Shadow, the Man from Sundown." But, no longer do his eyes gleam with the terrible light of madness.

"I cannot remember everything," he mutters, slowly. "I know that I was hanged in California—I know that some one cut me down and brought me back to life in some remarkable way. I swore vengeance on the wretches who had hanged me, and started on the trail. A part—the greater part—of the time since then has been a blank to me. Some time ago I found myself lying beside a dead man. A match showed me that the corpse was that of the leader of the gang that hanged me. He seemed to have been dashed to death upon the rocks, and I felt like I had had a terrible fall. I know not how it all came about, but I do know that Richard Harland is himself once more!"

The last words were spoken very distinctly. They were followed by a wild cry, and a female figure rushed forward to fling herself into the strange man's arms, gasping:

"Richard, my husband!"

The long separated husband and wife were reunited.

Nina had followed her mother closely, and Frank and Miss Mayblossom were not far behind. The scene which ensued is indescribable.

When the excitement had somewhat subsided and the Vulture Queen had been restored to consciousness, Dandy said:

"This has been a night of adventures and surprises, but thank Heaven! things have not ended as badly as they might. I have found my sister whom I believed dead, and, although she is queen of a band of men who are sometimes known as the California Vultures, I am glad to say that her subjects, not one of them, are in any way connected with the original band by that name. In fact, they have worked against the original Vultures and have succeeded in making the Hills pretty hot for them."

"But who is Captain Claw?" asked Frank.

"The genuine Captain Claw we knew as Edwin Hollis. Some of his nefarious business took him down the Niobrara, and when he was returning, he joined our train. He succeeded in communicating with his lawless followers long before the train reached the Hills, and I more than half-believed that the band of reds which came between your little party and the train were some of the Vultures

disguised as Indians. It was a trick to separate us. Hollis, or Miles Rexford, as is his true name, had planned to kidnap Miss Nina, which he afterward did. He is a crafty villain."

"Miles Rexford is dead," declared Richard Harland. "I believe that the hand of God struck him down."

"But, there was another Captain Claw," said Frank Fenway. "The leader of this band—who was that?"

"That was my sister," answered Dandy. "She played a double part. I am well aware that you suspected me, but I had nothing to do with the band. Old Dave saw me in their midst, but I was a prisoner at the time, although I had given my word to make no attempt to escape. That was why I was unbound. It was then my sister learned that I was searching for her, but she refused to see me. One of her men told me what I have told to you, and when I was released, it was with instructions to call upon the band if I ever needed friends."

"And at one time I firmly believed you a girl," Frank confessed. "I thought that you were playing a triple part."

"No, I did not not deceive you, although, for certain reasons, I withheld my true name, Walter Alger. I thought my sister dead, and was searching for the man whom I believed to have led her into a false marriage and deserted her. I feared that, if I gave my name, he would discover I was after him. I have found him, at last. He lies dead at my feet, but I am at a loss to know who fired the shot that laid him low."

"Ghost o' ole Goliath! Who fired ther shot? Waal, don't ye never tell ennybody as how I tole ye who dun it, fer I never tole ye a thing."

Old Dismal was on hand, and everybody looked significantly at the long rifle which he carried; but if they expected the old man to say more, they were disappointed. If the old guide fired the shot which dropped the youthful villain, no man ever learned the truth from his lips.

"In my search for Robert Rexford," said Dandy, or, properly, Walter Alger, "I was aided by a shrewd detective, who is among us. Miss Mayblossom!"

"Oh, dear!" panted the little woman, as she came forward, nodding and smiling in a silly way. "I am here, sir; but I am all shakin' with recitement and covered with respiration. These are terrible tryin' times for a poor lone woman, when all the men are as decephus as this miserable old dried-up wretch who had the outdacity to ask me to marry him, and then run away! Just as if I would have anything to do with a man—just as if!"

And she looked the picture of injured dignity and virtue.

"I never asked ye ter marry me, you old catamaran!" cried Old Dismal, now bristling up and seemingly full of fight.

"You did, you old bunch of bones!" snapped Miss Flora, shaking her fists under the old guide's nose. "You know you did! If you dare call me that nasty name again, I'll scald you!"

The again discomfited ranger took several sudden steps backward and sat down on the ground, quite forcibly. At this the little woman laughed heartily.

"Gentlemen and—ladies," continued Walter Alger—"I came near forgetting that there are ladies present—this is the detective who has helped me to find Robert Rexford. Allow me to introduce to you Cyrus Craftly, of the Chicago Pinkerton force."

In a moment, to the amazement of the spectators, Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom became transformed into a man! The skirts fell away and revealed the masculine attire beneath.

The shrewd detective had in truth played his part marvelously well.

The California Vultures disappeared from the Black Hills, but very few knew the cause of their sudden vanishing, and the fate of Captain Claw remains a mystery.

Richard Harland seemed to have recovered his right mind when he found himself lying beside the dead body of the man who had condemned him to death so many years before in California. It was a miracle that he was not killed by the leap over the precipice, but, it is also not unlikely that that fall and concussion really restored his reason. Re-united with his wife and beautiful daughter, he began life anew, feeling that his life had been spared and his reason restored.

Nina married Dandy—Walter Alger, for the rivalry between Walter and Frank terminated when Frank was instrumental in saving "Bess, the Vulture Queen," from the two desperadoes who were lying in ambush for her. From that hour the young Easterner thought by day and dreamed by night of her dark eyes and beautiful face. It was more than a year after Walter and Nina were married before Leda could be induced to accept the young man who was so enamored of her. At last, it having been established that her first marriage was perfectly legal, she consented. Let us hope that she found happiness and sunshine at last, and we are sure that we do not hope in vain.

Craftly, the little detective, is still in the harness. His favorite disguise is that of a little old woman.

And Old Dismal Dave?

If any one wishes to start the old Hills tramp's temper they have only to mention "Miss Flora Angelica Mayblossom."

"Ghost o' Ole Goliath!" he will say. "I didn't know w'at er blamed ole fool Dave Dunston could be till I got tooken in in that way, by er man in petty-coats. It makes me want ter bag my head every time I think o' it—it jest does!"

THE END.

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